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Golden West Romances

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FALL

FEATURED NOVELETS

Colleen of the Wishing Hills
By LEE FLOREN

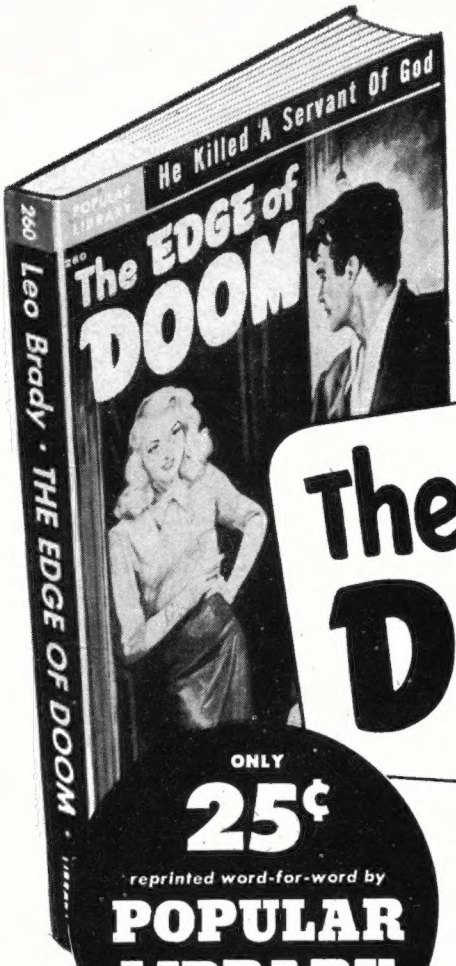
—

MADCAP OF THE BROKEN WHEEL
By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

—

OVER WHITECAP RANGE
By STEPHEN PAYNE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



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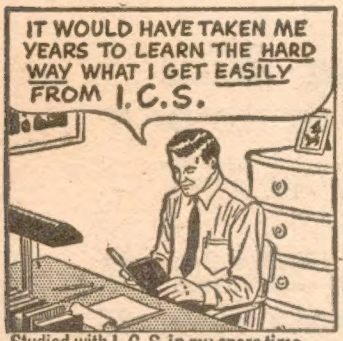

Studied with I. C. S. in my spare time . . .

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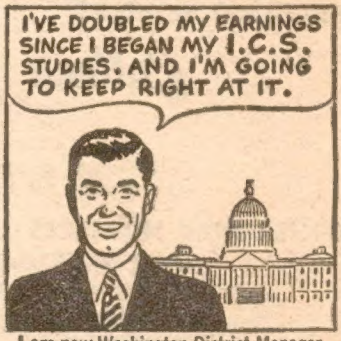

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Golden West Romances

Vol. 2, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Fall, 1950

FEATURED NOVELET

Colleen of the Wishing Hills

by LEE FLOREN 11

Carl Hudson, range boss of the Bar T, was under orders to drive the nesters out—till he faced the scorn in the eyes of Janet O'Reilly!

OTHER NEW NOVELETS

OVER WHITECAP RANGE.....*Stephen Payne* 64
Jeff Wade and Peggy of the J G Ranch fight menacing rustler enemies!

MADCAP OF THE BROKEN WHEEL.....*Johnston McCulley* 94
Molly Murphy horns into a range feud and saves a man from the noose!

SELECTED NOVELET

HOMBRE OF HER HEART.....*Marian O'Hearn* 126
An encore of a romantic novelet of rangeland conflict and intrigue

FIVE NEW SHORT STORIES

PINT-SIZED GAL.....*Ben Frank* 45
Could schoolma'am Susan Warren face the rigors of the Wyoming wild?

THE TONGUE-TIED COWBOY.....*Wayne D. Overholser* 56
Bad luck comes in batches for Bill Price when he has romance to win

TRUST YOUR DREAM.....*Marie de Nervaud* 83
A high-voltage romance gets some real help from a busybody's chatter

SHACKLE SHADOWS.....*Cliff Walters* 114
Only a girl's tears could melt the ice in the heart of Tom Burdette

MASTERFUL MAN.....*Ruth Anderson* 121
Sue Mason can't make up her mind between the two men who court her!

FEATURES

HEART OF THE RANGE.....*A Department* 6
ROMANCE RIDES THE RODEO.....*Foghorn Clancy* 90

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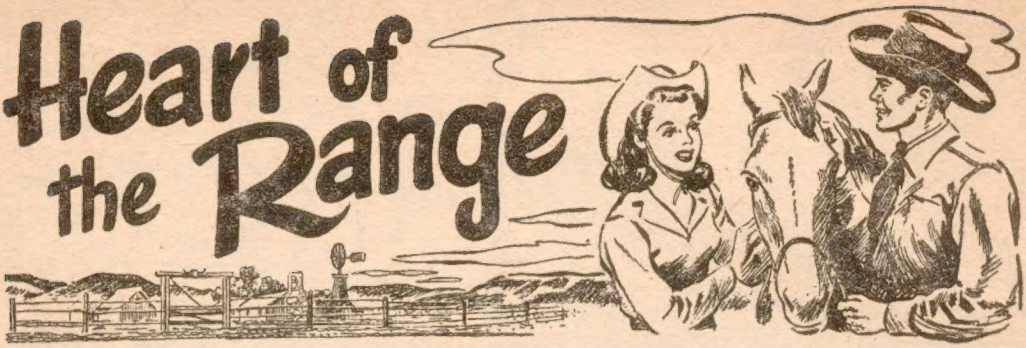
Heart of the Range



A Friendly Get-Together for Our Family of Readers and the Editor!

ROMANCE! It is a fragile, intangible thing, and yet it is like a bright sunburst lighting the drab colors of the long, gray days of lonely lives.

A cowboy acting as night hawk and guarding the herd in the tired shadows of night softly sings an old romantic song of the West as his horse slowly circles the sleeping cattle. . . .

High up in the hills a sheepherder watches his flock in the pale light of early dawn and dreams of romance. Down in the valley the pretty school teacher dismisses her pupils for the day, and her eyes grow soft with dreams as she waits for a handsome knight in range clothes to come riding into her life.

In the little cowtown over to the westward the owner of the general store goes proudly about his work. Wasn't his wedding one of the biggest events in that part of the country just two weeks ago? In his eyes his bride will always be the most beautiful woman in all the world, for he has found romance.

On the porch of the hotel an oldtimer spends his days basking in the warm sunlight, and dreaming of the romance that passed him by. But there was a time when it was nearly his, and he has his memories.

Stories of Western Hearts

Once more we bring you stories of such hearts as these in the next issue of GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES, stories that reflect the color and glamour of the cattle country. Again we shall present novelets and short stories with an entertaining blend of action and sentiment.

LOVE RIDES A STRANGE TRAIL by A. Leslie, next issue's featured novelet, is the story of Smoky Mason and the tempestuous girl who played such a vital part in his life. She was Francia, owner of the saloon and restaurant in the town, as beautiful and as dangerous as the rattlesnake to which Smoky once compared her.

Smoky Mason was broke when he rode into the cowtown called Olton. He left his horse at the livery stable and went to Francia's saloon and restaurant. He bought a sandwich with his last dime and was still chewing it when Francia Renshaw, the owner of the place, spoke to him. She was a pretty red-headed girl dressed in an unusual costume.

She wore small half-boots of softly tanned leather and tightly fitting black velvet pantaloons that came barely halfway between hip and knee. Her black silk shirt, mannish in cut, was open at the throat. Around her left shoulder was looped a heavy leather whip, the lash of which was a good ten feet in length.

Cowhand Turns Roustabout

Francia told Smoky to get all he wanted to eat and offered him a job as swamper in the saloon to pay for his food and to have a few dollars beside. Smoky learned that the girl could

handle the whip she carried when a drunken cowboy started making trouble in the saloon and Francia went into action with the long lash.

Later Smoky learned that Francia's brother had owned the saloon but that he had been murdered and his sister had taken over the place and was hoping some day to find the killer.

After Smoky had been on the job a few days he grew restless, for as he told Francia he was a cowhand not a saloon roustabout. She understood, for she had been brought up on a ranch herself, and she suggested that Smoky get his horse and take a long ride.

Smoky carried out her suggestion—and out on the range he was just in time to rescue a strange girl as her horse was about to carry her over a cliff. The girl was Stella Haynes from Louisiana, who was visiting her uncle, Jackson Haynes, owner of the big J Bar H outfit. Stella was a pretty blonde, and she fascinated Smoky.

Finally Smoky had to decide whether he liked Francia or Stella most—and a shootout with a couple of gunmen who were on his trail taught him a lot about that.

How Francia finds the men who killed her brother—and how Smoky settles his problem—will be revealed in LOVE RIDES A STRANGE TRAIL, a novelet that packs plenty of thrills and heart throbs from start to finish.

Blizzard Trail

Another headliner in the next issue of GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES will be QUEEN OF THE WINTER RANGE, a exciting novelet by Giff Cheshire.

Brian Lacy, heading the roundup crew from Kililee Basin, and owner of the Double L outfit, was riding the road to Fish Creek alone when he encountered the girl.

The big, rough valley of the Pipestone held an estimated ten thousand winter-drifted cattle that had to be gathered, sorted from local herds and moved home. A winter blizzard had sifted them three hundred miles, but it would take sweating toil to return them.

[*Turn page*]

TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write

but can't get started

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At the ford of the creek Lacy discovered the girl sitting on her horse and apparently waiting for him. Her greeting was friendly, and she knew his name, but when a drygulcher suddenly started shooting, Lacy suspected that the girl was there as bait in a trap for him. He covered her with his gun—but the drygulcher didn't fire again, and the girl refused to be frightened, or admit that she had anything to do with the attempted drygulching.

Her name was Taffy Dolphin, and Lacy had known her and her father, "Windy" Dolphin, back in Kililee some years ago. Windy hadn't been much good, and he and his motherless daughter had left town. Since then Taffy had grown into a pretty girl.

Lacy had a feeling that there was trouble for him on this range—trouble that also involved Windy Dolphin and Taffy—but he did not know just what it would be.

He was more convinced of it when he met Tony Petrea after leaving Taffy. Petrea was the big operator on the Pipestone and would run the valley's part of the big roundup outfit. Lacy found he didn't like Petrea at all.

When the two big outfits reached the roundup camp Lacy discovered that Petrea had brought his daughter, Anita, with him. She was a pretty brunette.

There was trouble between the two outfits, for Lacy was sure a lot more of his stock was missing than actually should be the case, and he suspected that Petrea had something to do with that.

Taffy and Anita play an important part in the story as Brian Lacy learns what happened to those missing cattle and brings things to a showdown. QUEEN OF THE WINTER RANGE carries plenty of action and suspense all the way through. It's a humdinger of a yarn!

There is a wealth of romance and adventure in store for you in these swiftly-paced novelets in the next issue of GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES.

In addition, there will also be two selected novelets, OUTLAWS OF THE CHAPARRAL by Edward Parrish Ware and TENDERFOOT TREASURE by Paul Evan Lehman, along

with a number of new short romantic Western yarns and interesting features to round out a swell issue of the magazine. Look forward to our next issue for a splendid feast of reading entertainment!

THE READERS WRITE

WHICH stories and authors appealed to you the most in this and other issues of GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES? Write and tell us what you think, for we value the opinions of our readers. Remember that we can take a knock as well as a boost. And knowing the likes and dislikes of our readers helps us to dish up future issues to your taste. And now let's take a look at a few of the many letters we have been receiving:

I started reading GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES with the very first issue—and am I glad! I think it is simply super. I have never been there, but I always considered the West a really romantic place—and the stories in the magazine have convinced me that I must be right. I get a big thrill out of reading every one of them.—**Martha Brown, Boston, Mass.**

And we get a big thrill out of reading letters like yours, Martha. Knowing that our readers like the magazine is always encouraging to us. Thanks for writing.

Just finished reading the October 1949 issue of GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES and it was swell. I'm a hard man to please when it comes to Western stories, and usually I can do without too much love interest in my six-gun yarns, but the way your writers blend excitement and romance is really something. I enjoyed every story in the book. Keep up the good work. —**Henry Mason, Denver, Colorado.**

Thanks, Henry. We aim to please, so we'll try to keep right on doing so.

Have been reading GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES since the first issue and I would like to tell you about the stories I enjoyed in the magazine. LURE OF THE DUSTY TRAILS by Marian O'Hearn is first on my list. Next comes ROMANCE RIDES WITH MARY WHEELER by Bradford Scott, then LONELY IS THE FIGHTER by L. P. Holmes, and THE TRAIL LED EAST by Wayne D. Overholser.

(Concluded on page 146)

"They showed me," says Mike
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A speeding car tried to run down Pete. A strange woman was murdered. Why was Pete involved in the crime?

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Colleen of the WISHING HILLS

Carl was saddling Gray Blanket when Birdie rode up

a Novelet by LEE FLOREN

Range Boss Carl Hudson was under orders to drive those sodbusters out—until he faced the scorn in the lovely eyes of Janet O'Reilly!

CHAPTER I

Rich Man's Daughter

IN THEIR haste they had missed branding some calves in the Wishing Hills region, for the country was rough in this section—a country of hills and pine, broken occasionally by flats where, in the spring, bluejoint and foxtail grass grew knee-high to a tall bronc. They were hazing a cow and twin calves out of the buckbrush, heading them down toward a flat where they could get their ropes onto them.

The cow was wild and mad, and she ran with slobber hanging from her jaws, her long horns wobbling. She had tried charging Carl Hudson's bronc back in the wild rosebushes, but the Bar T foreman had turned her with the doubled ends of his lass rope. And Shorty Madlin, who was riding with Carl, had come in too.

The Foreman of the Bar T and a Comely Nester

The cow, outnumbered, had bawled and fled, tail up. And her twin calves followed her.

Carl Hudson rode on stirrups, bronc breaking brush with his leather breast-collar. Hudson was a tall, bony man of twenty-six. For five years he had been Bar T range-boss. He knew cattle and he knew how to handle a crew. He could be tough and he could be friendly.

"Get 'em when they hit the clearin', Shorty."

"That's the deal, Carl."

Carl bent forward, rope built into a noose. Secretly he cursed the Bar T owners for not giving them time that spring to really work this country. But the Bar T was a corporation spread, owned by a New York concern, and the schedule called that a roundup be run in clock-work fashion.

Two days for the Myers River country, three days in Jonathan Basin—and so the schedule, probably drawn up on a desk by men who knew nothing of roundups, terrain, or Wyoming weather, had jammed the roundup through. And besides, one of the big bosses, Mr. Matthew Kalin, had made it a point to be at the Bar T during calf-roundup.

Mr Matthew Kalin had not ridden a bronc, for his bottom was evidently too precious to waste against a saddle, but each night, regardless of how far it was from the roundup camp to the Bar T headquarters, Carl Hudson had had to send a puncher over with a report to Mr. Matthew Kalin, telling how many head of calves had been gathered and branded.

The "schedule" had allowed three days to work the Wishing Hills region, an area approximately forty miles long and just as deep—one of the hardest areas to work on the Bar T. Carl Hudson knew—and his crew had also known—that calves had been left unbranded in the Wishing Hills. The roundup had been too hurried to work the draws and ridges for all the Bar T cattle.

"Good work, Mr. Hudson," Mr. Matthew Kalin had said when the roundup crew, tired and saddle-weary, had rumbled into the home-ranch right on the schedule. Mr. Matthew Kalin had rubbed his fat hands together and his narrow, heavy-lidded eyes had been the eyes of a gopher squinting at a newly-sprouted garden. "You see, by now, that a ranch, like any other business, must be run by business-like methods?"

"Reckon so," Carl had said.

HE HAD not been paying much attention to the Eastern banker. For Matthew Kalin's daughter, Birdie, had stood behind her dad, and she had winked at Carl—a slow, tantalizing wink that said, "Tell him to go to blazes."

But Carl didn't tell Mr. Matthew Kalin to go to blazes. For Carl Hudson wanted five more years of the salary he was drawing—a salary some twenty bucks a month better than that drawn by any other foreman in this section of Wyoming. So he held his temper back for the hundredth time and admired Birdie Kalin.

And this was not hard to do. . . . Birdie was blond and about twenty, and rumor had it Mr. Matthew Kalin had taken his daughter to Wyoming with him to keep her out of trouble in New York. Birdie had the curves in the right places, her blue eyes could be serious or dreamy, and Carl had also noticed they could be scheming, too. Women had no place in his plans at the present time.

Therefore, he had stepped shy of Birdie.

But Birdie had started out on roundup with the crew. The first day out she had ridden circle with Shorty Madlin, who had sported a wide smile and

reckless whoop. The next days she had ridden with Mike Hendricks, who then had the smile. Shorty had been as glum as Mike had been when Birdie had ridden with Shorty.

On the third day Birdie had said, "Now I'll ride with you, Carl."

"You'll ride for the home-ranch, Miss Birdie."

She had objected angrily. She had pointed out, rather pointedly, that her father owned over fifty percent of the stock of the Bar T. She wouldn't go. Carl had lifted her bodily into saddle. She had kicked and squirmed, nice to his grip, and finally he had her between horn and cantle.

Suddenly she had relaxed. "I'll be glad to go, grumble-puss." Her smile was magnificent, outshadowed only by her lovely, tumbling blond hair. I thank you very much."

"I brought you some coffee," Janet said

Then she had hissed, spat at Carl, and loped toward the home ranch, horse running wide-open. And the crew had laughed as Carl had wiped his forehead.

"A mite lower, Carl, and she would have hit you in the eye and drowned you, fella!"

"Get to your broncs," Carl Hudson had ordered. "This is a roundup, not a drawin' room tea."

From then on, Carl had kept clear

of Birdie as much as possible. The second day after roundup she had cornered him in the blacksmith shop where Carl had been alone heating a shoe preparatory to shoeing his gray pony, Gray Blanket.

'Now look," Carl Hudson had pointed out; "I don't want any trouble."

"Oh, Carl." A pretty frown. "Am I trouble?"

Shorty Madlin had come into the shop, breaking it up. Shorty always seemed to be close to Birdie. Mike Hendricks always made it a point, too, to have a chore that would always keep Mr. Matthew Kalin's daughter in view.

Carl knew the girl was just a city flirt who liked to make men mad over her. Not that he didn't like to be flirted with, either. But, to save himself and Shorty trouble, he had taken a pack-horse and outfit and headed back into the Wishing Hills range to brand calves missed by the hasty roundup.

"Get somebody else, Carl," Shorty had begged off. "My liver's bad. Get Mike Hendricks."

"Mike Hendricks and Smitty are headin' across the range to work the Bog Springs country. They'll be over there for a week, at the least. Your liver's all right Last night in that poker game you must have drunk a pint of red-eye. And you sure didn't complain about your liver then."

Shorty Madlin had grinned. Carl could almost read his thoughts. Mike Hendricks, his closest competitor for Birdie's smile, was going to Bog Springs, and Bog Springs was at least fifty miles away. He and Carl were going to work the Wishing Hills region, a mere twenty miles distance, and they would be back to camp in about four days, and Mike wouldn't reach camp for at least a week. That meant Shorty

would have three days, at the least, without Mike's competition when he returned to the home-ranch.

"It's a deal. Carl."

The first night out they had camped in the rocks where the wind wouldn't hit them. And Shorty had said, "That Birdie's for you, Carl. She don't see me or Mike Hendricks, but she does see you."

"You're stuffin' me, Shorty?

But the short man had shaken his head stubbornly.

Carl Hudson had smiled, then leaned back and sucked his pipe. Birdie Kalin had money, too much money. She was the only child. Her mother, he had heard, was almost an invalid, in and out of hospitals. When and if Mr. Matthew Kalin died, Birdie would be worth at least a million. And it didn't seem possible she could fall for a dollar cowpuncher.

No, it wasn't possible. Birdie could have her pick of the young New York dudes. This was only a passing fancy for her, nothing more. She was the type that needed a constant flirtation and because Carl had acted hard to get, she was determined to get him—and then, once she had him hooked, she'd wiggle the line and get rid of him, her conquest complete.

"Your liver *is* bad," Carl had said.

WHEN the calves hit the clearing, Carl took the one, a bull calf, while

Shorty took the other, a heifer. The cow stopped, her fight run out of her. This was an old tale to the cow. She had had a number of calves, and somebody had always roped them about this time this spring. This was the first spring she had thrown twins and she was still a little surprised, herself.

Carl's gray closed in. His loop went overhead, quick and sure, and the calf jumped into it. Carl wasn't a dallyman; he was tied hard and fast. The gray stopped, forelegs stiff, like he'd run into a barbed-wire fence. Carl went down, boots hitting sod just as the calf hit the end of the rope.

The calf bawled, then the noose cut short his wind. He swung around, hind legs straight up, looking like a sock blowing on a clothes-line. He thundered over, landing on his back. The blow drove the wind out of him with a savage grunt. Despite that, he tried to get up but Carl Hudson was on him.

The gray kept the rope tight, inching back on it. Carl's hoggin' string made its motions; the calf's three legs were tied in no time. The Bar T foreman reached for the rope and tugged it sharply a few times to signal his gray. The horse moved forward, letting slack.

Carl glanced to where Shorty Madlin had thrown the heifer calf. Shorty had one knee on the heifer's ribs, tying her three feet. By now the mama cow had back her wind and her fight.

"Look out, Shorty!"

Shorty looked around in time to see the cow coming, horns down as she charged. But the diminutive man was an old hand with cattle. There was only one thing he could do. That was to lie down and hug the face of Mother Earth like he'd have liked to hug one Birdie Kalin.

This he did, and did pronto.

By lying down the cow could not hook him. She could not get her horns that low to the ground. She ran over Shorty, slapping her slobbery nose against him, then kicking at him as she jumped over him and her calf. The cow, thoroughly angry now, pivoted like a ballet dancer, only a ballet dancer didn't pick up dust, and the cow did.

But by this time, Carl Hudson's gray came in. The horse's left shoulder hit the cow on her shoulder, sending her skidding and bawling. The horse followed in, and the cow sprawled in the dust. Carl's doubled rope resounded on her ribs like a Sioux beating his tom-tom. Mother Cow took for the brush at a bawling run, leaping wide-legged and bellowing.

Carl pulled in, grinning. He rode back to where Shorty was rubbing his dusty forehead and grinning. The cow turned but did not come back. She stood at the edge of the buckbrush, pawing occassionally but not venturing any closer. Evidently she had finally decided that these two-legged hairpins meant business.

"She got slobber all over my clean shirt." Shorty spoke with a great dryness. Before Birdie Kalin had come to the Bar T, right before spring-roundup, Shorty had changed shirts at least once a month. Now he changed every other day. "That's one thing about a cow: she's never grateful to a man."

"They're like a woman that way," Carl told him.

Shorty Madlin shook his thick head in feigned sadness. "You're a woman hater, Carl, and that ain't normal. I read that in a book."

"You don't know how to read," Carl snickered.

"A cruel, uncalled for remark," Shorty said, still sad. "Well, yonder's your bull calf, tied for the iron; yonder's my heifer calf, tied and ready for brandin'; yonder's the mammy cow, humble and content—and ascared. We get some brash, build us a little fire, and then we brands these critters, huh?"

A voice answered. But it wasn't Carl Hudson's voice. It was the voice of a woman who had just come out of the buckbrush.

"Cow thieves, huh!"

CHAPTER II

Sod-Busters

THE voice had come from behind Carl. He stood stock-still and the thought flashed through his mind, "Birdie has followed us." They were at the far end of Bar T range. The closest woman was either at the town of Sulphur Springs or the Bar T. Then he realized the voice did not belong to Birdie.

The voice was deeper than Birdie's, having a huskier quality. Carl looked at Shorty Madlin, who was staring at the woman. He figured you could have knocked Shorty's eyes out with a willow switch. Shorty's jaw had unhinged and it lay against his big Adam's Apple.

Carl turned.

This girl was dark of hair, small and dark, with a sweet face and lips opened slightly, showing her pretty teeth. She wore a housedress that clung here and there, and clung at the right spots, so Carl figured. But it wasn't the housedress or the girl so much he wondered about. It was the two things she held in her arms.

One was a baby: a chubby, curly-headed boy of about eight months, if Carl was any judge of a baby's age—which he wasn't. The baby was under one arm; under the other was a rifle—a Winchester .30-30, Carl saw, for he knew more about rifles than he did babies.

Carl almost gulped, caught the gulp in time. Here they were, miles from civilization, and out of the brush walks a girl—a pretty girl, too—and she carries a baby and a rifle, and what a combination—girl, baby, rifle and all.

Shorty said, "Holy Smoke," and his tone was that of a man who has just witnessed a miracle, but is still doubting his senses.

Carl asked, "What is this, ma'am? Why the rifle?"

"You're stealing cattle."

Carl looked at Shorty. By now Shorty's jaw had flipped up and his eyes had retreated. Shorty wore a puzzled frown and Carl figured the same type of scowl also covered his own forehead.

"What do you mean, stealin' cattle?" Carl demanded. "Cattle rustlin' is a serious charge around these parts, missus."

The baby, hanging over a capable forearm, looked from Shorty to Carl, and he seemed very solemn and judicial. Carl noticed that the woman's finger trembled around the eared-back hammer of the rifle and he also noticed the rifle was pointing at him.

"That rifle must be heavy on your arm thataway," the Bar T foreman said. "Especially when you got that heavy son of your'n on your other arm."

"He's not my son. He's my nephew. And I'm not a missus, thank you. I'm Miss Janet O'Reilly."

For some reason, Carl Hudson was glad to hear the baby was not her son, and glad to hear she was single. Why, he didn't know.

Shorty said, "Janet O'Reilly, huh? Heck, Irish women have red hair, an' your hair is as black as a crow's wing."

Janet O'Reilly looked at Shorty Madlin, who was grinning like a schoolkid that had just won a spellin' bee. She looked back at Carl Hudson, who was smiling, too. Then she looked at their two horses.

"That gray wears a CH iron. That bay packs a Circle Seven brand. And here you have two Bar T calves down to brand. If that isn't rustling, I'd like to know what is."

Carl said, "That gray is my private horse, miss. He packs my initials: CH. I'm Carl Hudson, range-boss for the Bar T. That bay horse yonder is ridden by my rider here, Shorty Madlin. The Bar T bought him a month ago from some horse dealers who drove through. We haven't had time to rebrand him yet."

The girl's teeth came out, settled on

her bottom lip. The rifle swayed a little as she shifted the baby again, and Carl felt a litle uneasy. But he still wondered what a woman, a baby, and a rifle, were doing out in the lonesome Wishing Hills.

"We got irons on my saddle," Shorty said as a clincher. "If you go close to my horse you can see it's a stamp iron that is formed to make a Bar T brand. And besides, ma'am, if you pardon my sayin' it, you're sure dumb."

"I'm dumb. Why, you insect!" Janet O'Reilly, Carl saw, *was* Irish, at that. "You little sawed-off wart!"

The baby had seen enough. He opened his big boy mouth and started to bawl. The cow stood in the brush and watched and waited. The baby started to kick at Janet's shapely thigh. Carl saw the rifle wobble again. He came in behind, grabbed the stock, lifted it. The hammer fell but the bullet smashed harmlessly into the sod. The girl couldn't handle her nephew, the rifle, and Carl at the same time.

CARL handed the Winchester to Shorty, who took it and then dug out his dirty bandanna to wipe his forehead. Above the bawl of the baby Shorty hollered, "A woman and a gun! I don't like the combination."

"Same here." Carl smiled

Janet set the baby on the ground. He started to crawl toward the cow. Shorty grabbed him and held him.

Carl said, "Good practise for you and Birdie, Shorty."

The baby had stopped bawling. He looked at Shorty who squatted with the boy sitting on the ground. The baby reached up and rubbed Shorty's whiskery cheek.

"Da, da."

Shorty grinned.

The baby reached for the rifle which Shorty held, butt-plate on the ground. Shorty moved it out of reach with, "That's only for auntie. She's been readin' about Buffaler Bill. Every man with a rope is a cow thief."

The fight had left Janet O'Reilly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hudson"

"Think nothin' of it," Carl said huskily. "Women are wrong most all the time, anyway."

Color returned. "Thanks."

The cow pawed, and Janet turned. Behind them the bull calf bawled. Janet said, "That cow? She isn't going to charge, is she?"

"She might." Carl spoke lazily. "If she does, just lay flat on the ground. She can't hook you thataway. But keep your head down until she goes over you. She might kick."

Janet's face was without color now. Shorty said, "Go on, Mrs. Cow." He laid the rifle down and threw a pebble that hit the cow on the ribs. It sounded like a hailstone hitting a tin roof. "She's full of grass," Shorty said.

The cow moved back and lost her hostility. There was a lot here that Carl Hudson, Bar T rangeboss, did not understand.

"Now, Miss Janet, can we go ahead with our chores?"

"I'm wrong, I guess."

Carl said, "Give her back her rifle, Shorty. Give her back the baby, too. We got work to do."

They left Janet and the baby and rifle and went into the brush, hazing the cow ahead of them. They found some drift-wood washed down by a cloudburst and got two armsfull of the dried wood.

"Who is she?" Shorty wanted to know.

"She told you. Her handle is Janet O'Reilly."

Shorty glared at his boss. "You want I should work on you with one of these big sticks? I know that much. But where'd she hail from?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know full well what I mean. You're just playin' dumb to hear what my opinion is, that's all. Women don't wander these hills, and them that do—and none does—don't tote babies or Winchesters!"

"You got me stumped," Carl admitted.

"Ain't you curious?"

"Not too much."

Shorty spat, rubbed his hands together. "The trouble with you, Hudson, is that you're so danged anxious to start a cow-outfit of your own, you're concentratin' on your job so you can keep on drawin' good wages. And you overlook some of the finer points in life."

"Like what?"

"Birdie, for instance. Now you take Birdie—"

"You take her, Shorty."

Janet O'Reilly and the baby watched the two Bar T men start a fire. The cow had evidently become reconciled to fate for she was grazing and paying no attention to her twin offspring. Shorty got the stamp-iron from in saddle and put it into the fire.

The baby, now hooked across Janet's arm, watched in silence, eyes wide and his mouth closed. Janet watched, too. Finally Carl asked, "You from the East, Miss Janet?"

"Illinois."

"Where's your saddle-bronc?"

"I walked over here. The baby and I were out looking for a chokecherry tree that had a lots of berries. They aren't ripe yet but when fall comes we intend to put up a lot of chokecherry jelly and jam and make some syrup."

"You live around close?"

SHORTY MADLIN was squatting over the bull calf, his back to Janet and Carl. Carl kept the girl in conversation so she would not pay any attention to Shorty. For Shorty Madlin was changing the bull into a steer.

"We live around the hill a short way," Janet said.

Carl could not hide his surprise. He looked up from the branding-iron. "We —live around the hill?"

"You ask a lot of questions, sir. We is my brother John, his wife, baby here, and me. We have a homestead."

Carl looked at Shorty. Shorty had finished his job. Shorty's eyes showed surprise, too. When the Bar T wagon had worked his region there had been no homesteaders in the Wishing Hills.

"You must've come in recently," Carl said.

"About a week ago."

Carl shook his head slowly. This was getting more complicated with each sentence spoken. Sulphur Springs town was about firteen miels to the north. The Grand Western had laid rails into the town, so he had heard. The Bar T did not trade in Sulphur Springs. Their trading-town was to the south at Willow Bend. Sulphur Springs was too far away from the home-ranch.

He had also heard that farmers had moved in around Sulphur Springs. They'd come in on the Grand Western, riding in boxcars with their families, their belongings, their farming equipment, and their stock. But that had not concerned the Bar T; the range around

[Turn page]

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Sulphur Springs had been occupied by the Bar T's northern neighbor, the Circle R spread. But here was a nester—a pumpkin-roller—smack dab on the northern rim of Bar T grass.

And Mr. Matthew Kalin and the Bar T stockholders would not cotton to that, not one bit.

Carl had heard that the Circle R was fighting the nesters. Right after coming from New York, Mr. Matthew Kalin had asked, "Any farmers encroaching on our range, Carl?"

"None, so far."

Mr. Matthew Kalin had rubbed his fat hands together and his fat lids had come down to give his eyes that predatory look.

"When and if a nester locates on our grass, report to me immediately, Carl. It's your job to keep them off our grass."

Carl had said, "Our range is far from the railroad, and I doubt if a farmer will settle on it. For one thing, if he did raise any crops, he'd have a long ways to haul them into Sulphur Springs."

"We'll tolerate no farmers on our range, Carl. The stockholders have money invested in this ranch and want a good return on their investments."

Carl had left the company of the great Mr. Kalin without further word. Sometimes it didn't seem worth while, even if he did get a twenty bucks a month bonus. Now, as he branded the heifer calf, he had a slight scowl across his forehead.

The hot iron hit the calf, who bawled in pain. The stench of burning hair and hide arose. The cow looked up suddenly, but did not charge. The brand burned in to his satisfaction, Carl restored the cooling iron for more heat in the fire.

"Doesn't that hurt the calf?" Janet said.

Carl said, "Sure didn't do anythin' else but hurt him."

"The other one's ready for the iron," Shorty put in. "Just let it heat up a mite. Well, reckon it happened, huh, Carl?"

"Reckon so."

"What happened?" Janet wanted to know.

Carl was blunt. "Nesters has moved in on Bar T range. And our orders are—" He halted suddenly, became silent.

Janet asked, "What's a nester?"

Shorty Madlin answered. "He's a farmer."

Janet understood then. Carl saw color come and light her lovely face. Her words were Irish and sharp.

"I understand. Well, we're not doin' anything but in a legal manner. My brother has filing papers for his one-hundred and sixty acres and my sister has taken up another quarter section. And when I get to be twenty-one in a few days, I'll file on a quarter-section, too!"

CARL looked at Shorty. The Bar T ramrod, unnoticed by Janet O'Reilly, shook his head slightly. Shorty got the iron and went over and added to the misery of the other calf. Carl untied the heifer calf and it ran to its mother, its ribs marked by the new Bar T iron.

Carl said, just for conversation, "Miss Janet, it's illegal to carry a runnin' iron on a saddle, here in Wyoming. A man can carry a stamp iron, though. With a runnin' iron, he can make any brand he wants; with a stamp iron, he's supposed to only make the brand the stamp shows."

"I see."

"Therefore, miss, you made a mistake when you jumped us as cow-thieves—a mistake any farmer from the East would make. And besides, what does the Bar T mean to you?" He answered that. "Nothing."

"But I read about cow-thieves, and I thought they were bad."

"Don't believe all you read."

"Are you trying to scold me?"

Carl shrugged. "Nope, I'm not, miss. Shorty, untie that critter, and let him go to his mammy." The Bar T range-boss looked at Janet again. "Me, I'd

crave a nice drink of spring-water, Miss Janet. And if I remember rightly, there's a nice spring on your farm."

The girl fell for the ruse. Carl wanted to look over her brother and his wife, for he wanted to know whom he was going to fight. And when Mr. Matthew Kalin heard nesters were on his graze, there would be a fight, too, if the farmer persisted on staying.

"Why, you're welcome," Janet said. "There's plenty of cold water in the spring." She spoke to Shorty. "Come along."

CHAPTER III

Something to Hide

A QUICK glance told Carl Hudson that the O'Reillys had done a lot of work in the short time they had been on their homesteads. John O'Reilly was chinking up the spaces between the logs in the new cabin. His wife, Patsy, was making mortar, using sand and a little lime. Janet introduced Carl and Shorty.

"They work for the Bar T," she told her brother.

John O'Reilly's handgrip was sure, but Carl read an uncertainty in the farmer. He was a heavy-set man of about thirty, or so Carl placed his age. Patsy O'Reilly acknowledged the introduction with a short nod that was not too cordial. She was a slender woman with red hair and big freckles. She wasn't too pretty, but Carl Hudson had lived long enough to realize that beauty is just an exterior varnish that many times hides true character.

"You've did lots of work," Shorty Madlin said.

"Lots more to do," John O'Reilly admitted. "Got the barn to finish, but we got all summer to do that. I'm puttin' my plow into about a hundred acres of sod, and I'll leave it lie fallow until spring, because the season is too far gone to grow nothin' much now except a few garden vegetables."

Both of the cowpunchers agreed with this logic. Janet got a pitcher of cold spring water but John said, "Heck, I got me some beer, men. Brewed it myself. Kinda wild yet, but it's drinkable."

Shorty's tongue moved out to lick cracked lips in anticipation. Carl said, "Thanks a lot, mister," and wondered what the brew would taste like. The last home-brew he'd drunk had been made by a sheepherder over on the reservation. It had been so powerful he wondered how the bottle held it.

But this beer was good. They squatted and drank and sparred. Sooner or later, the point would come up, but Carl was in no hurry. He let John O'Reilly bring up the subject.

"I've heard that the Bar T is a banker's spread," the farmer finally said. "Also heard that the big shot from New York is out here now."

"He's out here," Carl admitted.

John O'Reilly traced a ring around this beer-bottle, forefinger running through the dust. Janet and Patsy sat on a box and watched the men and both were silent. The baby sat in the dirt and played.

The baby put a nail in his mouth. Janet grabbed it with, "No, quit that, now! You know better than that."

Carl fingered his beer bottle and wondered just what was ahead. The simplicity of this family scene stirred him for some reason. He thought, Shucks, I'm twenty-six, an' I've got a few hundred saved, but what else have I got? Now why should he be thinking like that?

Finally he decided, A man ain't much good alone. An old bachelor is a pitiful sight, and I'm fast becomin' just that. But that thought was against his plan to work five more years, save every cent he could, then buy a few old cows and go into the cow-business on a small scale.

For he knew that the days of open range were doomed. Railroads were pushing to the Pacific Coast. there was talk of irrigation and wheat-raising, and Congress had even passed what was

known as the Homestead Act. For a few decades big cow-outfits had run on government range without owning a foot of grass or paying a cent of taxes. Those days, Carl Hudson figured, were almost over. A man can't fight progress.

Under the Homestead Act, a citizen could file on a hundred and sixty acres, then take up a hill claim, desert claim —well, all in all, a man could own two sections, if he worked it right.

Suddenly John O'Reilly asked, "What's the stand of them Bar T millionaires against a homesteader? I understand I'm settled on the north rim of graze claimed by the Bar T. That right?"

There the question was, uttered and waiting for an answer. Carl put his bottle down and rubbed his nose thoughtfully, looking at Shorty Madlin. But Shorty seemingly had eyes only for the bottle sitting between his legs.

Carl knew, without looking, that the two women were watching him. That would be the tough part of it: fighting two women. Fighting a man wasn't too hard, even though any fight was disagreeable; but scrapping with two women, especially when one was single and pretty, would be plenty tough.

But they expected an answer. Carl glanced at Janet. She was lovely, but she was worried; she was frowning. This would have been a small problem to Birdie Kalin. But Birdie Kalin was not the type who took to homesteading. Birdie's hands were soft, the fingernails long and well-kept; Carl saw that Janet's fingers had calluses, that her fingernails had worn down, evidently from mixing mortar for the chinking. But why did he notice such things?

"I can only give it to you the way the boss gave it to me, O'Reilly. And here it is: Us Bar T men got orders to run off every nester that dares set a foot on Bar T grass."

WELL, that was out; it hadn't been easy, either. Inwardly Carl found himself cursing the heartless corporation he worked for. The Bar T owned not a foot of the land its owners claimed. These hard-working people were squatting on just a small part—a very small part—of the Bar T range.

But the Bar T—and Matthew Kalin —were paying him good wages.

This was ironical. That morning he and Shorty had ridden out to brand mavericks. Then they had run into this dark-haired nester girl and met her family. That morning, before meeting Janet, it had appeared easy to run off a nester; now, though, it wasn't an easy chore—or a welcome chore.

"Is that an order?" John O'Reilly asked slowly.

"That's what the boss ordered," Carl got to his feet. "I only work for the Bar T. The owners lay down the policy and it's my job as range-boss to enforce that policy." He looked at Janet. "I'm sorry it turned out this way."

"I—" John began.

But the nester never got any further. For Janet was on her feet, and her eyes were on Carl in anger.

"You're—you're cheap!"

Carl said, "In what way?"

"You work for a big corporation that has no soul. You know that order is wrong, deep inside of you, you know that—still you carry it out! Well, what if we won't move, Mr. Cowman?"

"That'll be up to Mr. Kalin to decide."

She opened her mouth, said, "You big—", and then she closed her mouth. Her teeth came down, white against her red lip, and her glance held more than scorn—this time, it took in Shorty, too.

Then, skirts rustling, she entered the house, the baby under her arm. Mrs. O'Reilly, after giving Carl an angry glance, followed Janet inside. Carl got to his feet.

"Thanks for the beer, Mr. O'Reilly."

"I won't move," said John O'Reilly.

The farmer's voice held stubbornness. His was not an angry stubbornness like Janet's; his will was strong and deep and therefore more dangerous. Carl had no answer. He mounted Gray

Blanket and rode away with Shorty a pace behind the gray. They came to the brush and Carl glanced back.

John O'Reilly still stood in front of the cabin, beer bottle in hand as he watched them leave. Carl caught a flash of color at a window and decided Janet had also watched him and Shorty go.

They rode in silence for a distance.

Shorty said, "She's a pretty woman, Carl. I'd say right off she was every bit as pretty as Birdie."

Carl found himself comparing Janet and Birdie. Janet was dark and Birdie was light; both had sharp tongues. But there was no use in drawing mental comparisons. The hard truth was real and genuine, and Carl muttered something.

"What'd you say, Carl?"

Carl reined in Gray Blanket. "Get your mind, if you've got one, off of women for a spell. You know danged well what's botherin' me. When word gets to the Bar T that those O'Reilly nesters are on Bar T range, then Matthew Kalin is goin' order us to run them off."

"Mr. Matthew Kalin," Shorty corrected.

Carl cursed fluently. "Mister!" he said scornfully, and spat.

"How'll he ever know about these nesters?" Shorty asked. "He never rides over this way."

Carl studied his partner, then nodded. "You got somethin' there, fella. But here we draw wages from the Bar T an' we're workin' against the iron. And that ain't Hoyle in my book."

"Get a new book."

Carl rubbed his unshaven jaw.

Shorty continued with, "They've only got a small hunk of ground. God give us plenty of land without no hogs holdin' most of it. And besides, they got filin' rights for their land: what has *Mr.* Matthew Kalin and those Bar T bankers got to show ownership."

"Not a scrap of paper."

Shorty spat tobacco-juice. "That beer tasted mighty good. Sure would be a savin' to have a woman that could make beer. Well, Carl, you're the boss: what you say goes for me."

"We got calves to brand."

"There's another item that gets me. If them bankers would've let us work this country with enough time, you and I wouldn't be sweating our heads off and running horse-flesh to a frazzle for calves missed by roundup."

"Okay," Carl said. "Let's go"

THEY spent the rest of the day running out unbranded calves. By nightfall they were back in their camp in the sandstones. They had branded an even half-dozen calves.

Shorty cooked chuck over the open fire while Carl staked out their broncs. With the beans on the plate, Shorty squatted and said, "Wish I had a few quarts of that nester's beer to wash down this sourdough."

"Wish for the moon."

Shorty squinted at his boss. "You ain't none too hospitable, Carl, and it doesn't fit you, fella."

"Sorry, friend."

They had been long-time saddle-pards on round-up and other ranch chores. Back in the pines a bluejay scolded. Carl threw away a piece of biscuit and the jay came down and spared the biscuit and flew away. He was sorry his voice had been so sharp. But his nerves were anything but dull.

"How many more days we goin' be workin' this country, Carl?"

"Two more, I'd say."

Shorty gave this consideration. "I'm gittin' lonesome already for Birdie."

"Bet she ain't lonesome for you."

Shorty winced. "Unkind words, chum."

Inside of two days, Shorty and Carl Hudson had cleaned up the Wishing Hills range. The tally-book showed that the roundup had overlooked thirty-four spring calves.

"If those bankers consider that good management of a spread," Carl said slowly, "they sure don't savvy the cat-

tle-business."

Shorty was cleaning his Winchester. "Them bankers ain't got an eye for anythin' but dinero." The short cowpuncher squinted down the barrel of his rifle. "I saw Janet today, Carl."

"You did? Where?"

Shorty rubbed dust from the rifle barrel. "You were over on the other side of the ridge runnin' out cattle. Janet and Patsy and the baby were fishin' along the creek. That Patsy's homely as a mud-face but Janet sure looked sweet holdin' that willow fishin' pole."

"They catch anything?"

"Two catfish and a pike."

Carl remembered the worn and well-washed dresses of Janet and Patsy, and the tub-faded levis of John O'Reilly. The O'Reilly women were probably fishing for more than the mere sport of landing a few catfish and pike. They were poor people. John O'Reilly had invited them, his enemies, in for a beer. Mr. Matthew Kalin had never offered him a drink, Carl realized.

Yes, and Mr. Kalin had been pouring a drink out of a bottle one day in the office, and he'd looked up at Carl who had just come in. Mr. Matthew Kalin had held the jigger of whisky and downed it. He hadn't asked if Carl had wanted a drink. The hospitality of the O'Reillys had been a warm thing, despite the fact he and Shorty drew Bar T wages.

Now Carl Hudson felt the pull of disappointment. For some reason, he had hoped to meet Janet again, but here Shorty had had that honor. But he kept this disappointment from showing—or rather, he hoped he kept it hidden.

For two days he had found lots of mental unrest. Even though he tried to temporarily shelve it the question kept popping up: Should he tell Mr. Matthew Kalin about finding the O'Reillys as nesters on Bar T range?

He didn't want any trouble. He was just an ordinary cowhand trying to get along. He wanted to save up some dinero, settle on a homestead himself, run a few head of cattle back in the hills where the graze was too rough to permit farming. He had it all planned out.

He'd get a good piece of bottom-land, one with rich loam. He'd send down a plow and turn the sod over and raise alfalfa. Then he'd winter-feed his cattle and run them summers on open range. All his life had been spent working cattle. And past experience had shown him the big outfits were making a serious mistake. They did not winter-feed.

They ran cattle out all winter, hoping the winter would be mild and not winter-kill too many. They did not cut native hay and feed it when snow covered the range. And there Carl figured they were making their biggest mistake.

IT ALL summed down to dollars and cents, and mostly dollars. A cow outfit was run for profit and when too many cattle died in the winter the profit was therefore smaller.

Carl had seen that angle for some time. There was another angle, too, that the big cowman overlooked in his hurried greed for profits. The big cowman ran a poor brand of cow. His steers were bony and poor keepers—in other words, they didn't fatten up the way they should have had their blood been better. He aimed to ship in a big Hereford bull and build up his herd, when and if he got that herd.

But this was all in the future, and the future was mighty uncertain. And, no matter what his thoughts started on, they always revolved around to the same question: How about the O'Reillys?

By rights, he should report the presence of the O'Reilly clan to Mr. Matthew Kalin. He had done his duty as Bar T ramrod. He had warned the O'Reillys and told them to move. They had not moved. His next obligation was to tell Mr. Kalin about them.

But that was something else.

Carl didn't like the thought of trouble. This was, in fact, more than trouble: it might turn into a range-war if another bunch of nesters squatted on Bar T

graze. He looked at Shorty.

"What'll we do, Shorty?"

Shorty slipped the rifle together, gnarled fingers tightening the screw. "Those O'Reillys seemed to be nice people, Carl. You're the boss, though. You make up my mind, huh?"

Carl said, slowly, "Let's forget them, huh?"

"Suits me." Shorty shrugged. "Suits me danged well."

Carl got to his boots and started loading their bed-rolls and camping-equipment on the mule. Shorty would not mention the O'Reillys to Matthew Kalin or anybody else. When Shorty wanted to be tight-lipped a man couldn't squeeze a secret out of him with a crowbar.

But still, it troubled Carl Hudson. Here he was boss of the Bar T, and he was hiding the fact nesters had moved in. And why? Just because Janet was darned pretty? Was that it?

Maybe, he told himself. But there was something more, and he liked to think this was the stronger: The O'Reillys were, in a way, in a predicament similar to his—they were common folks with no airs and they were poor and they were struggling to make a living by working with their hands.

Every cent they made, every bite of food that entered their mouths, they worked for. And they worked hard. They pitted their strength and cunning against that of the soil and nature. They didn't sit back on easy-chairs and clip their coupons. Birdie Kalin had probably spent more money in one day that Janet O'Reilly might own in her entire life.

The O'Reillys had courage.

Shorty said, "Mike Hendricks won't be into camp for another day, Carl. That means I got all day tomorrow to spark Miss Birdie."

"How wonderful."

Shorty glanced at him. Evidently he did not like Carl's implication. They were a few miles from the Bar T ranch-house when they met a rider coming through the dusk. The rider turned out to be Birdie.

"Hello, Carl."

Carl said hello.

She put her horse between his and Shorty's. She wore an expensive riding-habit that did not hide her curves a bit. She did not ride side-saddle, either; she wore breeches and rode a man's saddle. Carl had never seen a woman ride anything but side-saddle before.

Her hat, gray and of fine felt, hung on her back, held by the elkskin thong and its silver buckle.

Shorty said, "Ain't you goin' say hello to me?"

"Oh, Shorty, I'm sorry." Shorty did not see her wink at Carl. "But I said hello. You just didn't hear me."

Carl knew she had not said hello to Shorty. But he saw the face of his saddle-partner brighten. The old saying, he decided, was right: a man in love would grab at anything.

"Where you headin' for, Birdie?"

"Heading for?" Her deep-blue eyes took on that surprised look. "Why, Dad said the schedule called for you two riding in tonight, so I rode out to meet you. Don't you—like it?"

"I do," Shorty said hurriedly.

CHAPTER IV

Last Warning

FOR six days Carl Hudson wrestled with his problem. On the end of the sixth day Shorty Madlin said, "I seen Mr. Kalin up by the house, Carl. He wants you to hotfoot up there right pronto. He seemed mighty disturbed."

Their eyes met and formed a question.

"What'd you figger, Shorty?"

Shorty shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm no good at riddles. If I was, I could probably solve Birdie."

Just to make conversation, Carl asked, "She givin' you trouble?"

"Lots of it." Shorty added, "Old Kalin said to make it speedy."

"Do you see me rushin'?" Carl muttered.

Matthew Kalin was behind the big desk in the living-room. The day had been exceptionally hot but it was cool in this big room with its Indian rugs and stone fireplace and rugged furniture. When Carl came in Mr. Kalin looked up, and Carl noticed the heavy lids were down and the eyes held that predatory look.

"You sent for me?" Carl deliberately left off the *Mr. Kalin.*

Matthew Kalin's heavy fingers drummed a pencil for some moments, the sound dull in the room. Birdie came in from a side-room and said, "Oh, excuse me," and her father snapped, "Sit down, woman."

Unseen by Mr. Matthew Kalin, Birdie stuck out her tongue toward him, then sat down, smiling at Carl, who still watched Matthew Kalin. His thoughts had little place for Mr. Kalin's daughter and her warm smile. This showed on Birdie's face in the form of a scowl.

Carl waited.

"Mr. Hudson, I have here a letter from the owner of the Circle R ranch. In it he informs me of his fight against nesters, as he calls the farmers. He also informs me of another fact."

Carl thought, This is it.

Aloud Carl said, "Yes?"

"Nesters have moved in on our Bar T range."

"Where at?"

Mr. Matthew Kalin walked to the big wall-map that showed the outlines of most of the big spreads in this section of Wyoming. He carried along a letter. When he got to the map he spread his legs wide. He looked like a bulldog as he scrutinized the letter.

"According to this information, Hudson, the nesters are on this creek, over in the Wishing Hills country." The eyes went on the map and a pudgy forefinger found the locaton of the O'Reilly homestead. "There's a family settled here. Name of O'Reilly. A husband, wife, baby, and some other woman."

Some other woman, huh? Carl suddenly remembered the dark loveliness of Janet O'Reilly.

"Only one family?" Carl asked.

"Only one." The eyes were on Carl now. "They have to go. One family get down roots, more'll follow The Bar T has to be kept intact. The stockholders look for a profit and a profit cannot be made if these farmers get our grass. You understand that, Hudson?"

Carl nodded. He didn't trust himself for words. For once Birdie Kalin was serious. The hardness of her father's voice had shown her he was sincere. And her eyes were without mirth as they sought out Carl's gaze.

Mr. Matthew Kalin returned to his desk. He paused beside it, looking down at a letter, but Carl knew he was not reading the letter. He was pausing for dramatic effect. Carl got the impression that this man was powerful, but money had bought that power.

The silence grew. Outside a bronc neighed in the corral.

Birdie asked, "What are we going to do, Dad?"

Mr. Matthew Kalin said, "We want no words from you, girl." He looked up at Carl. "I cannot understand one thing, Hudson."

"And that?"

"You and Shorty Madlin spent a number of days in the Wishing Hills branding calves missed by roundup. These farmers were settled there then, according to this letter. Yet you never ran across their farm, or anyway you never mentioned it to me."

"We found their farm."

The heavy head jerked around. The heavy jowls tightened a little. Then, "You did? Then why did you not report it to me?"

"I thought it no use."

"No use! What gave you such a thought?"

Carl said, "Shorty and me talked to them. We told them the Bar T policy would not allow a farmer to settle on Bar T range. I figured the threat was

big enough to make them move."

"And you never followed up the threat? In other words, you never rode back to make sure they left?"

CARL jerked his glance around. A man had moved in from the next room. He was a bony, ugly man of about forty. He had come West with Matthew Kalin, and he was the millionaire's bodyguard. Back East he had worn his gun in a shoulder-holster. But out here Winn Carter openly packed two guns. And he knew how to use them. Carl had seen him draw and shoot at tin-cans behind the barn.

Winn Carter looked at Carl, and his slow look made the range-boss angry. He hated the man for what he was—a cold-blooded, money-hunting killer. But he took his gaze back to Matthew Kalin.

Winn Carter leaned against the wall, looked at Birdie, then looked back at his boss and Carl. Carl knew the gunman had heard them talking and had sensed maybe trouble had been ahead for Matthew Kalin.

"I never checked," Carl said.

"Why didn't you?"

"I told you the reason."

Matthew Kalin looked past Carl in thought. Carl thought, I'm only a checker in this game and he knows it. He's going to move me now. He had his goal set, and to attain it he had to hold his job: But was any job worth this? Was he any better than Winn Carter?

"What's your plan, Hudson?"

Carl put it bluntly. "You're the boss. I carry out your orders."

Maybe some of his anger got into his voice. Anyway Winn Carter looked suddenly at him; so did Birdie. But Mr. Matthew Kalin did not look at him

"You take a man and ride over there tomorrow, Hudson. Give them final orders to move. They have three days to leave. Inside of three days you ride back and check."

"And if they haven't gone?"

"We'll run them out." Matthew Kalin clipped the words.

Carl walked outside. The air was cleaner outside. He walked toward his shack and Shorty Madlin sat on the bench in front of the log building

"Well, Carl?"

"We were right."

Carl sat down. Shorty caught a horsefly. He put it between thumb and forefinger and ground it flat.

"*Mr.* Matthew Kalin," Shorty said.

Carl looked at the dead fly. "It would be nice to do that to him, but he's too big —both with money and fat. Tomorrow I'm to take a man and ride over to Wishin' Hills and tell the O'Reillys they got three days to pull out."

"That Janet's a pretty girl."

"Forget the women, huh?"

Shorty said, "Take Mike Hendricks along, huh?"

Carl nodded. Shorty wanted Mike out of the way so Shorty could have a clear day with Birdie.

"You're wastin' your time."

Shorty stood up, yawned. "Reckon you're right, Carl. I need a girl who can milk a cow."

"You talk like a farmer."

Shorty looked down at him. "You said somethin' there. Maybe this farmin' won't be so bad. I've spent about half my life in a saddle punchin' the other man's cows. I've got calluses on my seat and my paws but I ain't got any dinero. I might take a spell milkin' *my own* cows."

"Maybe you said somethin'," Carl found himself saying.

Shorty left and Birdie slid down on the bench beside Carl. She put her hand on his. "Sometimes Daddy gets rough."

"He can't get rough enough for me."

Her deep blue eyes were on him. The dusk was thicker and a nighthawk bird zoomed overhead as he hunted flies.

"Play along with Dad, Carl. He can make or break men"

"I don't sell out."

Birdie drew her hand back. "I can't understand you Western men," she said at length. "I've done everything but throw myself at your boots." Her laugh

was shaky.

Carl had his arm around her. She came in close, warm and firm against him, and her head lifted, her golden hair tumbling back. He found her lips clumsily. She clung to him, putting emphasis on the correct spots. and when they broke Carl thought, She's kissed plenty of them.

"Go on to your room," he said.

"Why?"

Carl said, "I'll be ridin' out early. I'm sleepy." He got up and felt not too good inside, and he didn't know why. Wasn't every day a man got to kiss a million dollars. "Good night."

"Good night!" Angrily.

WHEN dawn came he was still tired, and sleep had been a hard thing to catch. He decided against taking either Shorty or Mike along. He'd go alone. He was saddling Gray Blanket when Birdie rode out of the barn on her horse. A pretty girl, and a gay-colored horse, he thought.

"Where you goin'?"

"With you.'

"Your father okay it?"

"No."

"Then you stay home."

She had one boot in stirrup, leaning forward. "Listen, Mr. Carl Hudson. You don't boss me around, savvy? My father owns this outfit and you're—well, don't boss me."

Carl said, "I'm not riding alone with you. I'm not havin' tongues wag about us. Shorty's going along."

She considered that. Her neat shoulders lifted. "As you say, Sir Galahad, the knight without gallantry."

Carl said, "You're makin' a fool out of me."

"Oh?" Arched brows. "And how?"

"This is just fancy for you. Something to brag about to your girl friends when you get back in New York. How you met the cowpuncher and how he became yours and when the conquest was complete you pulled out and left the yokel."

Her laugh was light. "You men must take lessons in hurting females."

Carl got Shorty, who dressed in a hurry, and saddled just as fast. Shorty and Birdie chatted but the Bar T ramrod was silent.

"A nickel for your thoughts," Birdie said.

Carl said, "Haven't any thoughts."

John O'Reilly was plowing. He had a team hooked to a walking-plow and he had just stopped to rest his horses. Carl looked at the house. The chinking was complete, and a foundation had been made for another building, evidently a barn. The entire farm looked comfortable and homelike.

O'Reilly's eyes were suspicious. "You men have ridden a long ways this morning. I take it this is your wife, Hudson?"

Carl grunted, "Not my wife. This is Miss Birdie Kalin. Her father heads the stockholders who own the Bar T."

"I see. Come up to the house?"

Carl didn't want to go to the house. He didn't want to have the eyes of Janet and Patsy O'Reilly on him when he told the farmer he had three days to pack up and get out.

"Here come the women now," Shorty grunted.

Janet and Patsy hurried from the house. Janet carried a rifle and Patsy held a short-gun.

"They mean trouble," Birdie said. "They got the look."

Carl said to John O'Reilly, "Fella, we don't want trouble. This is no doin' of mine. But the Big Boss says you got three days to pack up an' get. He told me to ride over an' tell you."

"By Big Boss you mean Kalin, huh? This gal's papa?"

Carl nodded. He didn't feel too pert about this. Janet and that rifle just didn't look good together. He noticed that Birdie was looking at Janet and her sister with the appraising eyes of one woman eying up another.

"I saw you once in town," Janet said. "You're Miss Kalin."

"That's right."

Patsy spoke to her husband. "What's

going on, John?" O'Reilly told his wife about Mr. Matthew Kalin's orders to vacate.

"He can't chase us off! We got first filing-papers for our land. We'll get the sheriff out from Sulphur Springs! We'll demand protection!"

"Won't do you any good," Shorty said.

"Why not?" demanded Janet.

Birdie Kalin answered. "The sheriff is very friendly to the Bar T, girl. The sheriff is an old cowman and I think he likes cattle better than he does a plow-pusher."

"Don't *girl* me," Janet warned.

"I'll *girl* you and make you like it."

Carl said, "For gawsh sake, women, shut up! This is no time to fight!" He appealed to John O'Reilly. "Get Janet to keep her mouth shut, please? Birdie, be good."

Birdie opened her mouth, started to say something, then said, "Oh, what's the use? I'd just be wasting my time."

JANET looked from Birdie to Carl. He read the hot anger in her dark eyes. She tossed her head angrily. "You're in *good* company, Mr. Hudson. Maybe my brother and his wife might move for the sake of the baby, but you can be assured you and your cowpuncher gunhands can never run me off!"

Janet went to the house. Carl looked at her straight back Then his gaze met that of Birdie."

Birdie said, "She read the act to you."

"Maybe," Carl admitted.

"Send Mr. Kalin over," John O'Reilly said. "There must be a compromise somewhere. Or I'll ride over and see him."

"Do that," Carl said. "Tomorrow, huh?"

"I sure will."

Patsy asked, "He'll—he'll be safe, Mr. Hudson?"

Carl nodded. "I'll guarantee his safety." There was nothing more he could

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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say. He had carried out his orders. And, as he had guessed, it had not been pleasant. He found himself wishing Janet hadn't gotten so angry.

They rode back toward the Bar T, leaving the stunned and sickened couple behind them. Shorty glanced back with, "They're still standin' there, Carl," and Carl nodded, but did not glance back.

"I feel sorry for 'em," Shorty said, then glanced quickly at Birdie, for he had said the wrong thing.

"Will they move?" Birdie asked.

"Don't know," Carl grunted. "Three days'll tell the tale."

"And if they don't move?" Birdie was persistent.

Carl shrugged.

They rode in silence for a mile, which was very unusual for Miss Birdie Kalin. Carl Hudson found himself wrangling thoughts which were definitely not pleasant. This range-boss job had been a good job what with that twenty per month bonus—that was, it had been a *good* job until Mr. Matthew Kalin showed up

Previous to this visit, all of Kalin's visits had been brief: just an examinaton of the books, whch were kept by the cook. But the ranch had lost quite a few head to winter-kill the past winter and, according to Kalin, the profit had not been great enough.

He was out to find out why the lower rate of profit.

Carl had hoped the millionaire would leave soon. But that hope seemed almost ironic. He wondered if Birdie was influencing her father to stay longer than originally planned.

He couldn't understand Birdie. She had a million bucks and he had nothing except his few dollars and Gray Blanket and his bedroll. But then he arrived at the same conclusion: She wanted to add a cowboy to her string of conquests. He had played hard to get so she had accepted what had turned out to be a challange to her—and which had never at any time been meant as a challenge.

He kept remembering Janet O'Reilly's anger. Her Irish temper had flared, her eyes had been obsidian, gleaming jewels, and her look had said, "You're as low as the man you draw wages from!"

And that hurt!

CHAPTER V

"You're Fired!"

WHEN John O'Reilly rode into the Bar T yard the next morning Carl Hudson was at the horse-corral sitting on a sorrel gelding he had roped and thrown and hog-tied. O'Reilly rode a work-horse that had collar-sores.

"The Big Boss home?"

"Up the house."

O'Reilly looked at the sorrel. "What are you goin' to do to him?"

"He's got a ringbone," Carl said.

O'Reilly stood on the stirrups of his old army saddle and looked at the sorrel's left front leg. "Sure enough, he has, huh? Anythin' you can do about it, Hudson?"

Carl knew the man was just making conversation to bolster up his spirits before going to the house to beard Mr. Matthew Kalin.

"Some split the hide open aroun' the ankle, take a hot iron and' burn off the surplus bone. But nine times out of ten the bronc is no good, even after that. This cayuse scraped his ankle against a boulder comin' down off the Chimney Rock country. I don't know."

"Looks bad."

Carl had no answer. He was inspecting the ringbone. The sorrel was a good cutting horse but he was of small account now with the ringbone. And the Bar T needed more cutting horses.

But here he was, worrying about the Bar T. No stockholders lost any sleep worrying about one Carl Hudson.

John O'Reilly said, "Reckon I'll take on the Hairy Wolf," and rode toward the house.

Carl watched the farmer dismount and go inside the big house. John

O'Reilly wasn't in there long. When he strode back his dark face was flushed and his lips trembled. "I should have hit the surly spalpeen!"

Carl found himself saying, "Why didn't you?"

The farmer looked back at the house. Mr. Matthew Kalin stood in the window, one fat hand holding back the curtains, and the millionaire watched them. Winn Carter stood in the doorway.

"That gunman would have killed me. He was a hawk, waitin' for me to make a bad move. And then the law is for the rich. If I'd have hit him, and that gun-dog hadn't killed me, the sheriff would have jugged me and chucked the key away."

"That Sulphur Springs sheriff doesn't love Kalin too much. Kalin's pressed him hard, he has, and that sheriff has a backbone of his own."

"Sometimes you talk like a white man, Hudson."

Carl was silent.

John O'Reilly said, "Well, I got to get along. He told me to be out by tomorrow night."

"You goin' to go?"

The farmer looked levelly at him. "Begorry, no. I got three rifles—me one, Patsy one, one for Janet."

Carl felt a touch of alarm. "But man, you got your baby to consider! Kalin will work this slick. He'll send over Winn Carter, and Carter'll kill you. Then where'll Janet and your wife and kid be?"

"I know that."

Carl asked, "Is any land worth that much?"

"No, the land ain't worth it. But I'll tell you somethin' that is worth it, Hudson. That's a man's pride."

"I don't think it's worth death."

"You don't, sure!" John O'Reilly leaned forward in saddle, voice hoarse with emotion. "Now don't get huffy, fella. I sort of cotton to you, even if you're on the other side of the fence. Janet seems to like you, too. But that's neither here nor there. You don't think pride's worth anythin' for the simple reason, Hudson, that you work for the Bar T and that big fat frog in yonder—and you've lost your pride!"

"Climb off that crowbait an' repeat that!"

"I'll do just that."

The farmer kicked a brogan out of his off-stirrup preparatory to dismounting. Carl saw that O'Reilly would fight. But it wasn't fear that had him say, "Forget it, Mr. O'Reilly. I'm wrong."

"You yellow?"

Carl said, simply, "I'm sick. Sick inside."

The farmer settled back, watching Carl Hudson. Then, without a word, he turned his old horse, gigged him to a trot, and went toward home. Shorty Madlin, who had come unseen to the corral, spoke and Carl turned, noticing the short cowboy for the first time.

"That fella's right, Carl. And what's more, he's a brave man. First time I ever knew you to turn down a fight, though."

"Maybe he's right."

SHORTY looked at Carl over the cigarette in his fingers. He bent his head and licked the cylinder into shape.

"Maybe he's right about both of us," Shorty said.

Shorty lit his smoke. They were both silent. By this time John O'Reilly had reached the brush along the creek and was hidden.

Shorty said, "Here comes Birdie."

Birdie said, "Dad wants you in his office, Carl. And he said come pronto. That farmer upset him. He wants you there right away, he said."

"There's no rush."

"He's mad."

Carl boiled. "Well, let him get mad."

"They had hard words," Birdie said. "First time in years I've heard father curse. The last time he swore was at a banker's meeting. He claimed—"

"I don't care what he claimed!"

"You're hard to get along with lately," Birdie said. "Shorty, help me ad-

just the stirrups on my saddle?"

"Sure thing."

The girl and the short bowlegged cowpuncher went to the corral. Carl coiled his rope and had his thoughts. He heard boots and looked up to see Winn Carter coming to the corral.

The gunhand's face was dark.

Winn Carter said, "The Big Boss wants to see you. And pronto, fella."

"Who do you think you are?"

Carter's sunken eyes appraised him. Carl read alarm first, then this changed to an igneous flint.

"Don't cross me, Hudson."

Carter's voice was flat. Carl Hudson realized then, with a suddenness, how he hated this gunman. And he found himself not hating Winn Carter so much for being a gunhand and crooked. He hated him for working for such a skunk as Matthew Kalin.

Carter had to be low to sling a gun for such a man.

Then something inside said, "Don't judge him too roughly, Hudson. You draw Kalin's wages, too—you two both have the same master." That thought was not wholesome. It was rotten.

Carl said, "All right, Sonny Boy, I'll be right up."

"Make it pronto."

"I heard you the first time."

Winn Carter spat out his cigarette, turned and went to the house, back straight. Carl saw that Shorty and the girl stood in front of the barn watching them. He hung his coiled lasso over a corral-post and walked toward the house. His nerves were as raw as the back of a saddle-galled bronc.

When he went past Birdie and Shorty, Birdie said, "Don't talk back to him, Carl. If you do, he'll fire you."

"Let him fire me."

Shorty looked at him, but said nothing. Carl went to the big house and wondered about his words. "Let him fire me." And he needed this job. He remembered his meager but hard-gotten bankroll. Since he'd met that O'Reilly girl the perspective of things seemed to have suddenly undergone a quick change.

When he entered the house, Mr. Matthew Kalin sat behind his desk. The millionaire was alone in the big cool room. He looked like a toad squatting on a lily-pad, Carl realized.

"You want to see me?"

Matthew Kalin looked up. His eyes held that mean look. He stood up and said, "That farmer was just in here. I ordered him off our land."

"The Bar T doesn't own deeds to the land it runs cattle over. That farmer owns a deed to his land."

"The Bar T was in this country before this farmer," Matthew Kalin said. "The Bar T claims squatter's rights to every foot of ground its cattle have grazed on."

"Squatter's rights are a dead issue. The Montana Territorial court proved that a year ago."

Now the eyes were narrower yet, and the thick bottom lip trembled slightly. Rage was in Mr. Matthew Kalin. That rage ripped off the thin veneer of civilization and lay barren the predatory greed underneath.

"What do you know about the Montana Territorial court?"

Carl said, "I can read."

That held the man for a long moment. Evidently he had expected Carl Hudson to kow-tow to him. Then Matthew Kalin said, "We hold Bar T range. Those farmers are leaving. If they're on their homestead by tomorrow afternoon, you take the men and ride over there and burn their buildings down and run them out of that section!"

"That's illegal."

"Don't worry about the legality of it. I ordered it and it's my shoulders that are to take the legal blame, if there is any. Money can go to the right spots and there'll be no trouble with this frontier law, such as it is."

CARL was silent. Kalin came around the desk, stopped. "Those are orders, Hudson."

Carl said, "You'll have to get another man to lead that killer-crew, Kalin. I won't do it. I won't fight poor people."

"Then you're discharged!"

The man's face was almost purple, his jowls flushed with blood. Now that he had taken the big step, Carl was suddenly calm.

"You're not firin' me, savvy. I quit of my own accord. I came to the house to tell you to get another fool for a foreman! I'm through, you purple-faced old billy-goat!"

The big man moved forward. He seemed terribly confident. He doubled his fist, lifted it; Carl went under the wild blow. He felt terrible elation as his fists, one after another, found the millionaire. Matthew Kalin went back, arms flailing, and hit the wall. He sat down.

A voice said, "That's enough, Hudson!"

Carl turned. He saw why Matthew Kalin had been so confident. Winn Carter had been standing behind the drapes that hid the doorway leading to Kalin's room. Winn Carter had a .45 in his right fist.

Carl said, "A frame-up, huh?"

Carter growled, "You can call it that." He spoke to Kalin, not taking his eyes off Carl Hudson. "What do you want me to do, boss? Kill him?"

Carl felt a cold spot around his ribs. They could kill him and money would buy both a clear verdict in a coroner's inquest—if an inquest would even be held! He should have been afraid, but for some reason he wasn't. He looked at Matthew Kalin.

The millionaire had gotten to his feet. He stood against the wall, one pudgy hand rubbing a bloody lip. Carl thought he detected something else beside anger in the man now. Could it be surprise?

Winn Carter said, "We can kill him if you want, boss. I came in, savvy, and he was beatin' you. I killed him to protect you, or otherwise he'd've killed you. Your money could see us through."

Matthew Kalin rubbed his lips gingerly. He drew down his thick hand and looked at the blood. Carl knew the millionaire was not hurt as bad physically as he was injured in his pride.

A man had crossed Matthew Kalin. *Mr.* Mathew Kalin. A cowpuncher—a poor, insignificant cowpuncher—had dumped Mr. Matthew Kalin on the floor. And Kalin's pride was hurt.

"Speak up!" Carter growled.

A voice behind Carter said, "I'll do the talkin' here, you two-bit tin-plated gunhog! That's a rifle in your back, and don't make the mistake of turnin'! Because if you do, fella, I'll run hot lead through your brisket!"

A great weight had left Carl Hudson. For Shorty Madlin, rifle level, had come in behind Winn Carter, and the short cowpuncher's Winchester was hard against the gunman's spine.

"Just drop that tin-handled pistol, Mr. Boston Gunman. That's right, let it fall to the ground. This Wincester is all oiled, the hammer's back. Carl, make it out the door, and pronto!"

"Thanks, Shorty." Carl hoped his voice sounded anywhere close to natural. "I'll cover you from the barn with my rifle."

"Do that, friend."

Kalin said, "You're fired, you little runt."

"You ain't firin' me," Shorty said, grinning. His eyes were bright with mirth. "I quit right before I stuck this Winchester into this gorilla's back. Mail my check into Sulphur Springs."

Carl heard no more. He ran across the porch, hurried into the barn. Shorty's bronc was saddled and he flung his kak on Gray Blanket, then led the two cayuses outside. He pulled his rifle out and held it on the house.

"Come on, Shorty!"

Birdie was working on her saddle beside the barn. "What's going on, Carl! You and Shorty playing cops and robbers?"

"Cattle-kings and cowboys!" Carl snapped.

Birdie stood up. Her eyes were puz-

zled. Shorty left the house on the run, Winchester in one hand, Winn Carter's pistol in the other. He threw the pistol to Carl who caught it. Carl was already in saddle.

Shorty said, "Here we go, son," and found his stirrup. "Get out before they start shootin'!"

Birdie screamed, "What's the matter? Where are you two going?"

Carl hollered, "To the wide open spaces," and then he and Shorty were thundering down the road. Brush concealed them after they made the turn. No bullets followed. They rode right into the bushes, pushed through a park spotted with cottonwoods, and came to the foothills.

Carl said, "They's no chance of them followin' us. They'd not want us that bad."

"I don't know. That millionaire was plenty hot!"

THEY rode for about two miles in silence, Carl letting Gray Blanket set the pace. Dust boiled up, spread out, settled. They left the hills and found the basin again. Shorty put his cayuse close, the pony breathing hard.

"Ridin' toward the O'Reilly farm, eh?"

"Good as any place."

"Better than most."

Carl said, "You saved my bacon, Shorty. The fire was kind of hot. I'm afraid they'd've burned me down."

"It was a great mental struggle." Shorty Madlin spoke in mock sincerity. "I knew you'd crawl the Big Boy's frame. I looked at Birdie, knowin' if I sided you, I'd lose her. So I debated it, sick inside like them writer-fellas describe the way the heroine feels when her pappy shoots her boy-friend."

Carl nodded, listening. He was riding away from the ranch that had been home for a long time. He was riding away with just his bronc, his saddle, his rifle, and his short-gun and the clothes on his back.

He hadn't even taken his belongings out of his shack.

"Go ahead."

"You ain't listenin'. Well, I looks at Birdie and then I thinks, "Shorty, you're not a fool; you're an idiot. This heifer don't cotton to you. So I takes my little rifle and visits the shack."

"I owe you a lot."

"Not as much as I owe you, Carl. You got me away from that cow-outfit. I should have quit before I got hired. But I'm brainless." His eyes fell on Winn Carter's .45 tucked into Carl's belt. "Give me that, huh?"

"What're you goin' do with it?"

Shorty turned the gun over and admired it. "Save it so's my first son can teeth on it, I reckon. That is, if I ever get that son. Hey, where we headin' for, Carl?"

"Sulphur Springs?"

"Okay with Shorty Madlin."

CHAPTER VI

Two Homesteads

HE WAS young—that county surveyor—and he was just out of engineering school. He looked at Carl Hudson and Shorty Madlin, who stood on the other side of the counter there in the surveyor's office in the court-house in Sulphur Springs.

"You two cowboys work for the Bar T, don't you?"

"We did," Carl Hudson corrected.

"Now you want to file on homesteads, you say. Well, you're the first two cowboys who ever came in here aiming to be farmers. You got homesteads staked out?"

Carl said they had. He and Shorty knew this range; they kney every dip, hollow and flat. They had decided to settle on farms close to the farm of the O'Reilly clan.

Shorty had smiled. "Now, looky, Carl. You don't aim to settle over there just because of Janet, do you? She might be

stringin' you along just like Birdie made a bird out of me."

But Carl Hudson had been glum-faced. "We know this grass, Shorty. We're partners, from here on. We need a spot where we can raise feed in the summer. This ranch—" He corrected himself "—I mean this farm—well, it has to be close to the rough country, because we'll run cattle back where farmers can't bust up the sod. And that Wishin' Hills country just fits the bill, I'd say."

Shorty scowled, rubbed his jaw. Carl figured the short rider was running a mental map of this section across his brain for analysis. Then, "You're right. Wishin' Hills is it. Wish Janet had a sister who wasn't married. We file on homesteads right pronto, eh?"

"Just as soon as we reach Sulphur Springs."

"Now old *Mr.* Matthew Kalin will be mad," Shorty said, and chuckled.

Carl had noticed, though, that the chuckle had had no mirth. . . .

"You got homesteads staked out?" the surveyor repeated.

Carl did some tall fabricating. "Yep, got them staked out." The counter top was made of glass and the surveyor had placed a county map under it. Cral's forefinger found the Wishing Hills. "Right in there."

"I haven't surveyed that land yet."

Carl stretched the story some more "We ran lines out from John O'Reilly's fence and determined our boundaries from that. Of course, we want you to come out and really run true boundaries."

The surveyor was busy filling out some forms. "No need of riding all that way to run out lines," he said.

Carl glanced at Shorty. The surveyor's implication was all too clear. The man was intending that the Bar T—and Matthew Kalin—would run them out of the Wishing Hills region. What the Bar T did to a nester was no business of the surveyor's. He only surveyed section-boundaries and made out homestead entries. He drew wages from the county, state, and federal government, acting as a U. S.Land Agent in the latter case.

"Sign here, men."

They signed, paid their homestead fees, and went outside, the first formalities behind them. Now they had to settle on their land, run their fences, and make improvements.

Shorty said, "Already my paws is achin' from grabbin' hold of a plow-handle." His voice was mournful again.

"We're in business for ourselves. Now to buy some farmin' equipment."

"To think that Mrs. Madlin's shortest son would fall so low as to be a farmer. Hey, let's walk past this eatin' joint again, huh? You notice that lovely little hasher. I believe she gave me the eye."

"You walk back."

"By gum, I'll do that."

Carl crossed the street to the Sheriff's office. The sheriff was a pot-bellied, gray-haired man, fifty years old, who had been busted up by a bad bronc, and who had sat in the law seat for about twenty years.

"How are things at the Bar T, Carl?"

Carl told about his run-in with Matthew Kalin. He told how Kalin had ordered him to run-off the O'Reillys. The sheriff nodded, silent and grim, and then Carl said, "Me and Shorty Madlin are takin' up homesteads, sheriff."

"Where at?"

"In Wishin' Hills. Right close to the O'Reillys."

The sheriff nodded.

"We figure Kalin will try to run us out of there."

"What time?"

"Sometime tomorrow. The three days are up then."

The sheriff nodded again.

SHORTY came out of the cafe. Carl met him on the street. "That hasher was just gittin' off work," the short man said. "She had a slick-eared gambler waitin' to escort her home."

"It paid you nothin', then?"

Shorty patted his middle. "Ate a good hunk of pie." He was suddenly very serious. "For a long time I been lookin' for some way to get away from a saddle. But there's quite a bit about farmin' I don't savvy, even if I was raised on a farm in Iowa. First, I'd say we need some barbed wire."

"First we need a wagon and a team or two."

They went toward the hardware store. Sulphur Springs was much livelier than Willow Bend town, where the Bar T conducted its trading. Down on a siding a locomotive sighed, the sound sharp in the day. Farmers moved up and down the Main Street, and teams and rigs—wagons, springwagons, buckboards—were at the tie-poles. Merchants were making money.

"Takes people to stir up excitement," Shorty said.

They had already talked over the matter of finances. Unknown to Carl, Shorty had almost six hundred bucks in the Willow Bend bank—money he'd made by punching cows. They would go fifty-fifty on everything, even the trouble. And both knew there would soon be trouble.

How soon?

Well, that depended upon Mr. Matthew Kalin and Winn Carter. Carl told Shorty about his talk with the sheriff. The officer had promised nothing. "In fact, he was very careful to keep astraddle the fence," Carl said.

Shorty had a bit of good news to add to this. While in the hotel he had overheard a conversation between some farmers. It appeared that the local cowoutfit, the Circle R, had gone against a few farmers. The farmers had banded together for protection and there had been a short pitched battle at the homesteaders' shacks.

"The sheriff heard about it, got a posse, and headed out. And by gum, he pinched the foreman of the Circle R and half his crew. They're down the jug right now, they tell me."

"Waitin' trial?"

"That's right."

Carl Hudson's homely face showed a wide smile. "Shucks, now, that *is* good news. That means the local law has finally turned against King Cow, I'd say."

Shorty's face fell. "Yep, it appears that way. But our homesteads are at least fifteen miles from this town."

They dickered with the hardware store operator. He had a back-lot full of farm machinery—plows, discs, harrows, and wagons. They bought a wagon at a price that seemed too high but they could get him no lower.

"You don't buy it at that price, cowboys, some hayhand will."

They bought the wagon and a plow. They bought a team of workhorses from the local livery-barn. But, as Shorty put it, they couldn't pull the plow with two horses: they needed four, at least.

"Gray Blanket and your cayuse are in for a sudden surprise," Carl said, smiling. "Neither has ever had a collar on, let alone seen one. We better buy another set of harness."

Finally they had their rig ready: a new wagon, a new team, new harnesses, new machinery, a load of groceries and other essentials.

"Bet we forgot somethin'," Shorty said.

They had paid for it with checks on the bank in Willow Bend. The sheriff had made good their signatures and had remained silent.

The team jogged along, seemingly well-broke. Tug chains rattled; steel rims crunched on sand and gravel. Behind the wagon trotted Gray Blanket and Shorty's horse. Carl slapped reins at a horse-fly that had rested on the off-horse's rump.

"You got him, Carl."

Carl nodded. The sun was falling but it was still warm and good. Dusk would stay a long time after the sun went down and there would be a long false twilight. By the time they reached the O'Reilly farm it would still be dusk.

Shorty said, "Fate's a funny thing.

Here I wake up this mornin' in a Bar T bed and now I'm in our wagon. Hey, Carl, we never bought any beddin'!"

"We forgot."

"What are we goin' to do?"

"Sleep under our saddle blankets?"

Shorty's nose wrinkled. "Not me. Them blankets smell of horse-sweat. Wonder if the O'Reillys got any extra beddin'?"

"We'll see."

THEY made small talk—talk that was irrelevant. It covered their nervousness. Over at the Bar T Mr. Matthew Kalin and Winn Carter were two angry men. But would the rest of the Bar T crew ride with Kalin?

"I don't know," Shorty said slowly. "Some of them scissorbills are awful scared of losin' their ridin' jobs, such as they are. Well, Mike Hendricks has got the upper hand with Birdie, now that I've left."

"That's terrible," Carl sympathized.

Shorty was right. Some of the Bar T men might ride against them and the O'Reillys, not motivated by loyalty to Kalin, but by the almighty dollar. He ran through the list of the crew in his mind. He knew each man well. Hadn't he been their ramrod for five years?

"Some might ride with Kalin. Hendricks would, just to make a good showin' in front of Birdie," Shorty said.

"Birdie," Carl said.

Shorty spat on a bronc's rump. "Wonder if we'll ever see her again, Carl?" His voice was almost wistful.

Carl found himself glancing at his partner. For the first time he realized that Shorty had been hit hard—and real hard. But he couldn't blame him. Birdie had everything, including a million bucks. But Birdie also was Mr. Matthew Kalin's daughter.

"We'll say you could marry Birdie. We'll say she's willin' to hook up with you, Shorty. Would you marry her?"

"I sure would. Right pronto."

Carl gestured. "Then you'd have Mr. Matthew Kalin for a pappy-in-law. How would you like that?"

Shorty did not hesitate. "It wouldn't be worth it."

When they drove into the O'Reilly yard not a woman was in sight. Carl heard the high whine of the baby crying inside the cabin. John O'Reilly was unhooking his tired horses from the plow. He had a rifle leaning in reach against the plow-seat.

"Holy Smoke, what's this?"

The farmer's surprise was genuine. Shorty was grinning from ear to ear. Carl did the explaining.

"And—and you two gents did that? You done filed on homesteads adjoinin' mine! You quit the Bar T!"

"We got canned," Shorty said.

"We quit before we got canned," Carl corrected.

John O'Reilly bellowed, "Come on out, women! We got neighbors! Come a-runnin', too!"

[Turn page]

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Janet carried the baby. Carl found himself thinking that a baby fitted into her arms much better than the Winchester rifle had the day before. Patsy grinned, freckles jumping.

"We got to make a camp," Carl said.

"Over by the trees," John O'Reilly said. "In the shade. I see you bought a tent. Say, you've got a lot of equipment. I'll trade you the use of my horses for the use of your plow and harrow."

"The trees are on your property," Shorty said. "We want to camp on our own land, don't we, Carl?"

"No. That closer location suits us better."

There was a moment of silence that cut through the chatter. All too well every person there knew the implication of the former range-boss' words. They had one more day of grace before the Bar T acted. It was best they be banded close together, for in numbers and unity lay their strength.

"The trees it is," Shorty agreed.

They started to unhook. Carl finished his part first. When he moved around to help Janet, she said, "No, I'll do it myself. Here, hold the baby." And Carl found himself awkwardly holding the baby while Janet unhooked the chains.

"Don't he act awful uncomfortable?" Shorty teased.

They all laughed except Carl, who was suddenly interested in the baby's small fingers.

"Wonder what the Mr. Matthew Kalin looked like when he was this old?" Carl joked. "Think them big fat hands of his was ever this small?"

Janet stuck out her tongue. "Mr. Matthew Kalin! Bah!"

THEY finally got their equipment out of the wagon, aided by the O'Reillys. For the fourth or fifth time Shorty had to tell the homesteaders about Carl hitting Matthew Kalin.

"How about that girl?" Janet asked Carl.

"What girl?"

"Don't play dumber than you are! You know what girl I mean! That girl who was here with you yesterday, the one with yellow hair."

"Miss Kalin?"

"You didn't call her Miss, I noticed. You called her Birdie."

"She's jealous," Shorty claimed with a grin.

Janet didn't color. "Maybe I am." She bit her lip, then smiled. "I shouldn't have said that."

"She's a thing of the past," Carl said. "A dream that has busted itself. I am innocent."

"All men are," Patsy said, speaking out of wisdom acquired by years of marriage.

Shorty and Carl had to eat with the O'Reillys. John O'Reilly and the women would have it no other way. After the baby had been sent to bed, the five farmers sat under the trees, talking things over.

Patsy didn't believe the Bar T would try to run them off. "That outfit is full of air," she claimed with Irish assurance. "Hot air too."

Janet was undecided. So was John. Shorty and Carl were silent. Finally the women went to bed, leaving the three men alone.

They sat and talked. The fire died down and became coals and these died and became a part of the darkness of the Wyoming night. The moon finally came up and its light was old and yellow.

"What do you think, Shorty?" John finally asked.

"They'll hit, I think."

O'Reilly looked at Carl. "You're the ex-range-boss of the spread, Carl. Give us your honest opinion. What'll they be likely to do?"

Carl spoke slowly. "The Bar T will move against us. If we stay, other nesters will move in. We're the test case. All of the Bar T men won't go with Kalin and Winn Carter, but some of them will."

"I'm sorry to hear that," O'Reilly said seriously.

CHAPTER VII
Last Meeting

SINCE they had decided it was best to take no chances of a surprise attack by the Bar T, so they stationed a guard. Carl had the morning watch and dawn was coloring the sky when Janet came through the brush. She carried a small pail.

"I brought you some coffee," she said.

The coffee was hot and Carl was chilly. It tasted good and he thanked her. She had tears in her eyes when she looked up at him.

"Oh, I hope there is no trouble, Carl."

Carl read her goodness. She was worried not so much about herself as she was about the baby. His heart went out to her.

"I hope not, too."

Lazy smke lifted from the cabin stove-pipe. Dawn strengthened and they went to the cabin, both silent. Carl was letting his mind go ahead to build a defense against the Bar T, when it struck. How many men would ride with Winn Carter? Would Matthew Kalin be with the raiders?

Neither questions could be answered at this time. Only the future would reveal the answers. Therefore Carl Hudson decided to give up all conjecture and wait for time to answer his questions.

Patsy had breakfast ready. Pancakes and bacon and plenty of coffee. The baby slept in his crib. Carl found himself studying his newly-found farmer friends. John O'Reilly had bloodshot, sleepless eyes and worry rode his wide shoulders. Patsy looked a little haggard.

Janet did not look any too fresh, either. Shorty Madlin had his head low as he ate and the short man was, for the most part, rather silent. In fact, little was said. What words spoken were almost all light and did not concern the trouble that this day might bring.

Carl pushed back with, "Fine meal, Patsy," and the red-headed woman showed a smile that did not stay long.

The cowpuncher went outside and sat under a cottonwood and sucked his pipe. Shory came from the cabin and squatted beside him and rolled a cigarette. Shorty was silent and Carl was silent.

John O'Reilly was milking. A horse neighed in the pasture. Shorty shifted to his other leg.

"You know how to milk a cow, Carl?"

"Sure. Long time ago."

"Ain't hard," Shorty said.

John O'Reilly carried the buckets to the house. He washed his hands and came out and settled down beside Carl.

O'Reilly asked, "What do you say, Carl?"

Shorty looked at Carl, his eyes holding the same question. It seemed they had elected Carl Hudson their leader whether he liked it or not. But Carl had to admit he liked it.

Carl said, "The women and the baby should be sent into Sulphur Springs."

O'Reilly nodded. "But they won't go, Carl. They've made up their minds they'll stick through with us. No use talkin' no further along that line with 'em. They won't leave."

"That's bad," Carl admitted.

"I know it. But that's the way those two are."

Carl continued with, "All right. We have to accept them as stayin' here. But they got to get into that root cellar yonder. We don't want either of them killed."

O'Reilly called, "Women, come here!" When Janet and Patsy stood before them, John O'Reilly told them they'd have to stay in the root-cellar. The two exchanged glances.

Janet said, "All right. We'll drill some holes in the walls for our rifles. You'll need every gun we got."

Carl looked at the root-cellar. The roof, he noticed, was not level with the ground; two cottonwood logs were between the roof and the soil. He didn't like the idea of the women fighting, but

he settled for the root cellar.

Carl said, "Move in there, and take the baby with you."

The women returned to the cabin. They took the baby's crib into the damp, dark cellar.

"Hope he doesn't catch a cold," Janet said.

Carl said, "We got to play this safe. We don't know when they'll hit. But I'm danged certain they'll hit."

"Where do you men plan to make a stand?"

"In the cabin."

JANET looked thoughtfully at the cabin. "You'll have to drill some holes for your rifles. Either that, or knock out some of that chinking. It's probably not set hard yet."

Janet and Patsy got the brace-and-bit and drilled holes in the logs. Carl and Shorty and John knocked out chinking between logs and hacked and made holes for their rifles. The cabin was out in the open and would be easier to hold. And if it got too hot, they might be able to retreat into the brush.

"Wish we had some extra rifles," Carl said.

"Why?" Shorty wanted to know.

"We could jam them through these cracks, and the Bar T would figure we were in the cabin. But we could be out in the brush and we could work in from behind Kalin and Winn Carter."

"I got some half-inch pipe," John O'Reilly said. "We could jam lengths of it into them holes—might look like rifle barrels."

They tried that. But they didn't look like rifle-barrels and would fool nobody, not even a man as dumb as Winn Carter. So they decided to make their stand in the cabin. The walls were constructed of thick logs and therefore it made a good fort.

Shorty went out on guard. He came in at noon and Carl rode out into the brush. He got on a high point and from here he could see in the direction of the Bar T. But the rider did not come from that direction.

He came from the direction of Sulphur Springs, and he was the Sulphur Springs sheriff.

"Kind of settled, huh, Hudson?"

Carl said, "This is the day, sheriff."

The gray-haired lawman shifted in saddle slightly. "Might just be talk, Hudson. Kalin talk."

"We're takin' no chances."

The lawman had nodded, then neck-reined his bronc and ridden away without another word. Carl got on the hill again and watched the star-toter ride toward Sulphur Springs. He lost sight of the man along a creek.

Evidently the sheriff figured Kalin would not hit, and he was riding back to his office. Carl wished that he was as optimistic as the Sulphur Springs sheriff. He wished the sheriff had stayed for the day. But the lawman had just turned his bronc and ridden away.

Carl had another visitor that day. And that visitor was nobody else but Birdie Kalin. Birdie had her suitcase tied to her saddle and this brought a touch of surprise to Carl Hudson.

"I'm leaving, Carl. I'm catching the train out of Sulphur Springs."

"Why?"

"I don't want any part of this trouble." Birdie had dismounted and she stood in front of Carl, who held his rifle. Her presence was a warm, living thing and it affected Carl strongly. "I came to warn you, too."

"About your father?"

She nodded. "He's riding this way himself. He and Winn Carter—that black-souled killer—and a few other punchers who are afraid of him. I quarreled with them and left."

"I'm sorry. About your father."

She laughed, but it was not light-hearted. "Carl, Dad and I were never close. He'll get over it—unless he's killed. But when you hit him you did more than knock him down."

Carl understood. Matthew Kalin had pride—a fierce, tough pride. He had

broken men mentally and financially, yet a Wyoming cowpuncher had knocked him down. And another Wyoming cowpuncher had made a fool out of Kalin's pet gunman, Winn Carter. Kalin and Carter would never forget that incident in the Bar T ranchhouse.

Carl's face must have shown his soberness. "How many will ride with your father?"

"Hendricks, a few others. Some might back out. Some of them did. They said they'd not fight you. Father fired them and they left the ranch."

Carl nodded.

Birdie seemed interested in her boots suddenly. She ran the toe of a fine calfskin boot through the gravel. When she looked up Carl saw her eyes held tears.

"Carl, kiss me, please."

Her lips were moist and sweet. This time Carl did not fumble. They were one for a moment. Birdie stepped back, her laugh shaky.

"Here I am, a rich girl. Raised in a city, with men demanding me for my money, if nothing else. Carl, it would never work, would it?"

"What do you think?"

She shook her head, hair tumbling. "I've thought and thought; it won't work. I like excitement and maybe I'm wrong—oh, well, why talk about it. Good-by, Carl, and God bless you!"

HER kiss was quick, and then she was on her horse. Carl watched her ride toward Sulphur Springs and he knew he would never see her again. He could still feel her lips against his. Then a thought came, she'll get over it, just as Time makes everybody forget.

He was a poor man without education, without polish. She was rich and she had gone to the best schools. She came from luxury and he had come from a poor family. And it wasn't really love. He had been a challenge to her because he had not chased her.

He watched distance claim her.

He went to his bronc and sat on the hill. He put his arms around his knees and the first thing he knew his head was down, his chaps rough to his face. And he cried for the first time since he had been a kid.

Janet found him sitting there.

She came out of brush, carrying a rifle. He looked up at her and yet he felt no shame for his tears. He put his head down. She sat beside him.

"I saw her ride away, Carl."

Carl said, "She's a wonderful woman."

"I didn't mean to spy," Janet said. "I was bringing you a bottle of beer." She laughed a little shakily. "I saw you two talking and I didn't want to go back all the way so I waited."

"That wasn't spying."

"She—she loves you."

Carl did not answer.

"Do you love her, Carl?"

Carl looked up. She was dark and small, her face was earnest. He knew then, and he was sure.

"No, I don't. She's a woman—a lovely woman—but we just didn't belong. I don't think she loved me, either. I hope not."

"I hope not, too."

"Why?"

"Oh, I—won't tell you."

Their eyes met. Their eyes held. Danger was around them, binding them with a terrible web.

He said, "Janet, when this is over, we'll be married in Sulphur Springs. Janet, you're crying!"

"It's my turn now," she sobbed. "I'm so darned happy!"

CHAPTER VIII

Battle in the Brush

LIKE savages, the invaders came at dusk. First, one man came. He left his bronc, and he disappeared into the brush, then reappeared behind a rock. Janet said, "I—I don't understand it?"

Carl said, "They sent in a scout. He looks like Mike Hendricks to me. The others are hid along the brush yonder. Along the creek, I'd say." He kept remembering Birdie.

They waited. The man was watching the cabin. Carl had his field-glasses and he put them on the man. He lowered the glasses with, "That is Hendricks."

Finally the man turned away and vanished in the bushes.

"What'll we do?" Janet asked.

Carl said, "You go back to that root-cellar. Warn your folks and Shorty that Hendricks has sneaked in and scouted for the Bar T. Tell them to get ready for the trouble."

Her eyes met his. They were very calm and Carl caught the true nature of this woman. When trouble came, she met it. She would be that way all her life. She was weak, yet she was strong.

"And you, Carl?"

"I'll be in later."

That was enough, for she trusted him. This trust showed. She did not kiss him again. She went into the brush and it hid her. He remained on the hill and he watched through his field-glasses. Finally he saw riders file from the brush along Nameless Creek.

He could not have seen them had it not been for his field-glasses. He watched them, trying to keep calm. The muscle along his throat jerked with regular monotony despite his efforts. They came closer and when about two miles away they bunched. They were a dot for a while, silent and distant in the failing day. They broke then and scattered and the brush hid them. The brush and the coulees and draws seemed to suck them in and absorb them.

He lowered his glasses.

Matthew Kalin had been one of the riders—Mr. Matthew Kalin—and the banker had finally put himself into a saddle. And full well did Carl Hudson know why. He had knocked Kalin down, and Kalin had hate toward him. The rest had kow-towed afraid of prestige bought by the dollar sign, but a Wyoming cowpuncher—just a simple cowpuncher—had knocked Money Bags kicking.

Winn Carter had been one, and that was expected. Mike Hendricks had been the third. The other two were Bar T cowpunchers. Carl found satisfaction in the fact that the other Bar T riders, men who had taken his orders and worked with him, were not with the millionaire and his gunman.

Hendricks had scouted the O'Reilly farm, and Hendricks had brought back his report. Carl knew what his report had been. Hendricks had watched the house, had seen John O'Reilly and his clan, had probably seen Shorty Madlin. And Hendricks had reported back that they had turned the log house into a fortress. That had been part of Carl Hudson's plan.

Now he waited for the Bar T men to surround the cabin. They would hide in the brush and shoot into the O'Reilly cabin. They would figure that O'Reilly and Madlin and one Carl Hudson would be inside. And in that idea Mr. Matthew Kalin would be in error.

For Carl Hudson would not be in the cabin. Carl would be in the brush fighting the way an Indian fights. Sneaking, shooting, killing. And between Carl and the two in the cabin, they would get Bar T on the run. Or so Carl hoped. . . .

So Carl Hudson waited, and he had fear inside of him. This fear was alive and cold, and Janet was concerned in it. Concerned vitally. Strangely, Birdie Kalin was forgotten, a memory that did not return.

For he had already dismissed her from her mind. He had to do that. Had her memory clear with him, then it would be hard to fight her father. For the simple fact remained that Matthew Kalin was out to kill him.

He felt anger toward the Sulphur Springs sheriff. The man was astraddle the fence. He had given no promises, yet why had he been in this section but a few hours before? Carl Hudson took his mind from the sheriff. The ways

of man, he reasoned, are unfathomed ways, and no man has ever solved the riddle of the other man and his thoughts. And so he shoved the memory of the sheriff also into the discard.

He waited for almost half an hour, according to his big silver watch. Then, the allotted time up, he went ahead on foot, carrying his rifle. He left his cayuse ground-tied. He went through kin-i-kin-ick, that red bark the Cheyennes peeled and used for tobacco. He skirted clumps of bullberry bushes.

HE WENT through buckbrush and wild rosebushes were thorny. He worked his way toward the cabin. He had left his spurs tied to his saddle; he wanted no jangle to betray his presence. This was man kill man. Dog eat dog.

This was ironical, too. Here he was out to shoot down the man who had paid his wages. Yet he owed this man—this soft man with the hard eyes—no allegiance. For the man had never had felt any friendship toward him. And you cannot have allegiance without having friendship.

A twig broke to his right. It twisted him, rifle up. It sent him to his haunches. He waited, holding his breath. He heard no other sound. Still he waited; the smash of a rifle broke the silence. And another rifle talked.

The siege was on. Bar T men were firing into the cabin. He hoped that Janet and Patsy and the baby were in the root-cellar. Matthew Kalin was as dangerous as he was ruthless. He would kill to hold land for profit.

But this thought was of secondary nature. It paled beside the fact he would have to get Matthew Kalin out of this fight. For with Kalin gone, Bar T men would pull out. They owed the Bar T owner no allegiance. For he held no friendship for them, either. So Carl Hudson decided to hunt down Kalin.

The dusk was thick. This aided him and yet it hindered him, for it made recognition an uncertain thing. It hid him to a degree but it made it hard to identify certain men. But this thought was useless. Were a Bar T man to see him, a gun would talk. He came to the clearing and he hunkered in deep buckbrush.

The Bar T men were still firing into the cabin. Already windows had been broken, and somebody had shot the hinges off the door. The door hung at an angle. Gunfire broke red from the cabin. Gunfire also came from the root-cellar.

He knew that Shorty and John O'Reilly would be worried about him. But this thought was trivial, too. He knew the fight would not last long. It couldn't last long. It was too savage.

He ducked back, and worked his way toward a point where he had seen the flame of a rifle. He was almost there when he heard a man behind him, and he turned. Matthew Kalin stood there with a rifle. Kalin said one word, and it came out savagely. "Hudson!"

Carl Hudson had his rifle up, the hammer back. Kalin was a savage now, tough and hard, and the pressure of the situation had pulled the varnish of civilization free, leaving his face the way nature had meant it—full and predatory and ugly.

"You won't buy your way out of this," Carl Hudson said.

His words sounded far and dim, yet he knew his voice had been shrill. They stood like this for a while, and then the hate came and filled the space between them. And with this hate was mingled a great pity. Matthew Kalin held the hate, and Carl Hudson held the pity.

Kalin growled, "I have a rifle! I intend to use it!"

The words were useless. Carl Hudson had read the stark, terrible hatred on the man's face. Still, he remembered Birdie Kalin. Birdie was this man's daughter. Birdie had kissed him and he knew then he couldn't kill Matthew Kalin. He couldn't kill him because of Birdie.

Later, Carl remembered his gunfight with the banker, but then he remembered each movement with a clear, cold logic. Now this was all blurred in the

streak of action. He went to one knee, bringing his rifle to his shoulder. He did this in one clean, swift move.

The swiftness of this move saved his life. Kalin's shot went over him, and then Carl's rifle spanged sharply—the reports joined, Carl's behind Kalin's. He shot for Kalin's right shoulder. He shot for the point where the rifle's stock found the thick shoulder. And his rifle-bullet hit that spot.

It smashed through the hardwood stock, plunged into Kalin's shoulder. It turned Kalin, and it flung his rifle wide; the Winchester landed on the ground. Kalin went to his knees, one hand on his shoulder.

Kalin said, "Don't shoot! I've lost my gun!"

Carl came ahead, savage now. His gun-butt came down and it hit Kalin on the forehead. The banker went down and lay still. Carl said, "That'll hold you," and then a sickening push came from behind. It knocked him ahead and he thought, "Somebody's shot me from behind!"

He rolled over, and he was aware of a bullet hitting beside him. It seemed like a weird, uncertain nightmare. One thing was certain: a man had come from behind—a Bar T man. Then he saw the killer known as Winn Carter.

Carter had a six-shooter, and it spoke again. Carl knew, somewhat vaguely, that Winn Carter had missed. This was wild in him and he had his rifle up and he shot two times.

DEATH is not pretty, and Carl Hudson had seen death before, both to man and beast. But this was self-defense, and he had no scruples. Carter yelled something, as he fell, at Carl who knelt there. But Carter did not move again He lay on his face, nose pushed into the earth.

Somewhere men shouted. He heard the crash of riders. He heard a voice he recognized.

"You Bar T outlaws, surrender! This is the law!"

It was the bellowing voice of the Sulphur Springs sheriff. Carl realized the man had had a posse hidden out and had come in at the right moment. Then all realization left under the push of the pain in his ribs. . . .

Later, through darkness, Carl heard Janet say, "Come on out of it, Carl."

Carl opened his eyes and looked at her. A lamp burned on the table. Remembrance flooded him. He tried to sit up. He groaned. He lay back on the bed.

"Where's Kalin and the others?"

Shorty Madlin was there, right arm in a sling. Patsy sat on the chair, face somber as she held her baby. Across the room John O'Reilly lay in the other bunk. The lamplight showed the Irishman's wide grin.

"Stopped one with my shin-bone, Carl. You and I are in bed for some time. The sheriff said you have got some busted ribs. The sheriff said he'd send out the Sulphur Springs doc." The farmer winced. "Oh, me, oh, my—that shin of mine!"

Shorty said, "Take it easy, both of you."

Carl shifted his eyes and looked at Janet. The lamplight made her face sweeter, made her dark hair shine. "Where's Kalin and the others?" he repeated.

"The sheriff took them into jail. All except Mike Hendricks and Winn Carter. They're—they're dead."

Carl asked, "How about Kalin?"

Shorty chuckled. "Sheriff says he'll throw the works at Kalin. Claims up and down he'll put Kalin behind bars. Kalin said us farmers could stay here."

"He must have been scared," Carl said.

"Scared! Heck, he was more than scared—he was white as a sheet. He figured we boys didn't play for keeps. Hey, you ain't listenin', you wool-bound farmer! You can't pay attention with Janet kissin' you like that!"

Finally Carl Hudson got free of Janet. He looked at Shorty and winked. "I heard every word you said," he lied.

Pint-Sized Gal

She was small, soft and pretty—but could schoolma'am Susan Warren endure the grim rigors of life in the Wyoming wilds?

Afterwards, she was never sure how she got Ron from under the limb

by Ben Frank

THE school day had ended, and Susan Warren was at last alone with her thoughts and the dull swish of the cold Wyoming wind. She sat at her desk, a small, fair-skinned girl of twenty, with dark brown hair that curled about her ears, clear, wide-set hazel eyes and a proud lift to her round chin. But there was a crying ache in her heart.

She stood suddenly. "If you want to get home before dark, Pint-size," she said to herself, "you'd better be moving."

She ran to the big iron stove and shut the draft. Then for a moment, she stood in the center of the small school room, looking about, and a smile touched her wide soft mouth.

A few good reproductions of the kind

of pictures children love decorated the clean, painted walls. Gay cloth curtains hung at the windows. Near the desk stood a bookcase crammed with her own good books, which she had had shipped from the East.

"Anyway," she murmured as she hurried to the closet for her heavy coat and overshoes, "even if I am pint-size, afraid of horses, howling coyotes, cattle and rattlesnakes, I've showed them I can teach school and make the kids like it."

But there was more to happiness than knowing this. There was loving Ron and wanting his love.

She stepped into the cold push of the wind sweeping down out of the north. The early darkness was crowding in fast. In the distance, a lone coyote howled, and a shudder ran through her. She had not gone far, however, before the howling coyote and the winter's cold were forgotten. Susan was thinking back as she had done so many times before, searchingly, trying to discover a reason for this trouble between her and the man whom she loved. . . .

The moment they saw her, they had disapproved of her, these wind and sun-scorched ranchers. She could guess what they were thinking. Too young to teach school. Not as big as some of the kids.

"A pint-sized city gal like her won't be much good here," she had heard one man mumble to another.

SHE stood at the teacher's battered desk, forcing herself to smile at the scowling men and meet their eyes. "I'm older than I look," she said. "I have a way with children. I'll get along."

The men shifted uneasily under her level gaze. A stocky, round-faced rancher stood and cleared his throat. His name was Ed Simms, she remembered vaguely.

"My boy, Joe," he said unhappily, "is a head taller than you, miss. Teachers have had some trouble with him. He don't like school."

Susan's eyes suddenly flashed. "Can you blame him?" she flared. "Look at this place. It's like—like a prison! It's a wonder they don't all hate school!"

Ed Simms blinked in surprise at this sudden tirade and sat down rather meekly.

"What this place needs is paint, some nice pictures, curtains, a library, new—"

Susan stopped, for Mel Davis, president of the school board, had arisen. A momentary twinkle touched his blue eyes.

"Young lady," he rumbled, "we've been pretty hard hit here the last few years. We'll do well to pay you your salary, let alone fix this place up." He turned to the other ranchers. "Miss Warren has come a long ways to see us. I, for one, am willin' to give her a chance."

He sat down heavily. No one said anything. Outside, the dusty wind tore at the small, brown building.

"Am I, or am I not, hired?" Susan asked at last.

The men glanced at each other, nodded slowly. Then still didn't believe she could handle the job. Too little. Too young. Too pretty. But they had no choice. Teachers were difficult to find for this out-of-the-way, lonely place. They got to their feet and shuffled out, all except Mel Davis, the president. A giant-sized, middle-aged man with graying hair, he stopped in the doorway.

"I got one child of school age, miss," he said. "Tina, we named her. Sick when she was five. Wears a brace on her left leg."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Susan said.

He smiled and shook his head, and she thought, There's something fine about this man. And something a little sad—as if he's had more than his share of trouble.

"Don't feel too sorry for Tina, miss," he said. "She's a cheerful one. We've tried not to spoil her and wouldn't want you to give her any extra favors."

He turned to leave, and she said impulsively, "Thank you for giving me a chance, Mr. Davis."

He faced her once again, and she was

startled by the harsh lines that had come into his face.

"This is a hard land, miss," he said. "It's hard for us men, but it's worse for the women. Especially some kinds of women!"

He put on his hat and strode to where he had left his horse tied to the one tree in the school yard, a gnarled and dying cottonwood.

Puzzled and a little shaken by his words, Susan watched him ride from sight. Suddenly, loneliness seemed to crowd in on the dismal whine of the wind. Shuddering, she dropped down at the desk, and the appalling drabness of the room added to her feeling of black despair. If only she did not need this job so badly—

School began the following day. She faced the twelve rebellious children with a smile on her face and a tremor in her heart. Tina Davis, a small, sweet-faced girl with coppery curls and wide blue eyes, was the only one who returned her smile.

"I like you, Miss Warren," she whispered shyly at noon that day.

But big Joe Simms didn't like her. His scowling responses told her that. Then she caught him drawing a picture, took it from him and was startled to see a remarkable likeness of herself, except for the freckles and horn-rimmed glasses which he had given her.

"Why, Joe," she said, "you draw wonderfully well!"

JOE gaped at her. He had expected anger, not praise.

"I had no idea you could draw like this," she went on. "Do you think you could brighten up this room by drawing something on the board with colored chalk?"

"Yes'm," Joe mumbled, his eyes turning hungrily to the box of colored crayons she held toward him.

The thing he drew was a Wyoming sunset with a background of purple mountains. He placed a small house and pole corrals in the foreground.

"That's my home," he said, his eyes glowing.

"It's lovely, Joe," she told him.

For the first time, he smiled at her. From now on, she somehow knew, Joe Simms would never pose a problem for her.

Days, became weeks, and then a month. Joe helped her paint the interior of the school with paint which she paid for out of her first check. She brought in her books and pictures, and the girls helped her make bright curtains for the windows.

One day after school, Tina Davis threw her arms about Susan and kissed her. "You're wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Then embarrassed at her display of affection, the child hurriedly limped out to where her brother waited for her by the old cottonwood. Susan watched the big, laughing cowboy reach down from the saddle, swing the child up in front of him and ride away at a gallop.

"He's nice," she thought. "I'd like to meet him."

Her wish came true the next day. School had been out for some time, and all the children, except Tina, were gone when Ron Davis came for her. But this time when Tina ran out to him, he dismounted, lifted the child into the saddle; then stood by the tree, looking at the schoolhouse as if trying to make up his mind about something.

Watching him through a window, Susan saw him hitch up his worn levis, straighten his big hat and head toward the front door. She sat down quickly at her desk and pretended to be very busy.

He came to the door and stopped. Pulling hit hat from his sandy hair, he grinned shyly. He was tall and rangy, broad shouldered and slim.

"Hello," she said, thinking how really nice looking he was and feeling her heartbeat quicken. "Won't you come in?"

Spurs jingling, he took an uncertain step toward her. His eyes were very blue with tiny laugh wrinkles in the

brown skin about them.

"Just wanted to tell you, miss, how pleased we are at the way you're runnin' this school," he said. "Tina thinks you're the world's best. We're mighty fond of Tina."

She felt the color rising in her cheeks at his honest praise. "Thanks, Ron," she said, standing. "You see, I know your name. Tina's told me about you."

'Gee," he said, staring at her, "you are pint-sized! But awful pretty and—well, I'd better be goin'!" Face red, he hurried to the door, paused. "If there's anything I can do for you, miss, just say the word."

Suddenly she wanted to see him again, soon.

"Could you teach me to ride a horse?" she asked quickly.

His embarrassment evaporated. "You bet I could do that," he returned. "How about Sunday afternoon? I'll come over to the McGill's and bring an extra horse."

"Will you?" she said, a little startled at the rush of blood past her eardrums. "I'll be looking for you Sunday, Ron."

He hurried away, and she sank back down at her desk.

Now, she thought, what made me ask him to do that? Horses frighten me. Always have.

Sunday afternoon, Ron rode up to the McGill house on his big roan, leading a quiet-eyed pinto. He was dressed in his Sunday best with his trouser legs tucked into a new shiny pair of riding boots and a bright bandanna about his brown throat. Both horses gleamed in the sun from hours of patient grooming.

SUSAN, with Mrs. McGill's help, had fashioned a short, wide green riding skirt for the occasion. Standing before him, she was very lovely with the sun against her clear skin and soft, brown hair.

She saw approval in Ron's blue eyes and quick smile. He helped her mount the pinto. For a moment she felt terrified and must have looked it, for he grinned reassuringly and said, "Don't be scared, Miss Warren. This pony's as gentle as a kitten."

In spite of her fear of horses, the afternoon passed all too soon for Susan.

"I got to get back home," Ron said, eying the setting sun unhappily. "Maybe you'd like to ride again, Miss Warren."

"Ron," she said, "it's Susan, not Miss Warren."

He grinned down at her. "Susan it'll be from now on," he promised. "And there's to be a square dance at the Simms' ranch next Friday night. Maybe you'd like to go with me?"

"I'd love to," she told him, "but I never danced a square dance in my life."

"Reckon you could learn."

"I reckon I could," she laughed.

He lifted his big hat and rode away in a swirl of dust, trailing the pinto. A song in her heart, Susan went into the ranchhouse and found Mrs. McGill sitting by a window, reading.

"Ron's one of the nicest boys I've ever met," Susan said.

Mrs. McGill brushed back her graying hair and smiled. "He comes from a nice family."

"Is he the only boy?" Susan asked.

Mrs. McGill's eyes dropped a little too quickly to her book.

"He had an older brother, Mart. But Mart's dead."

"Dead? Oh, I'm sorry. What happened "

"Maybe Ron'll tell you about Mart some day," the woman answered quietly.

Susan went to her room. The song had faded from her heart. She stared at her small oval face in the mirror, vaguely noting that she had sunburned her nose. Then without any apparent reason at all, she was remembering Mr. Davis' words that first day.

"This is a hard country, miss," he had said. "It's hard for us men, but it's worse for the women."

Friday evening, Ron came for her in an open-topped buggy pulled by a pranc-

ing gray team. The ride across the rolling grasslands through the gathering darkness was fun for a girl who had spent most of her life hemmed in by tall buildings. Susan enjoyed every minute of it. Ron had lost some of his first shyness and now joked and talked as they rode along.

The young people whom she met at the dance were friendly, but she detected a certain caution in their friendliness toward her.

I'm new here, she thought, and they're not sure about me. But they'll soon learn to know me—like me, I hope!

The intricacies of the square dance completely baffled her first. Always she seemed to be doing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

"I'm an awful dummy," she said laughingly to Ron.

"You're awful pretty," he said warmly, smiling down at her.

Later, they rode homeward without talking much. When he helped her from the buggy in front of the McGill home, he said, "If folks seemed kind of standoffish tonight, Susan, it was because you kind of had 'em scared. After all, you're different."

"No, I'm not," she declared quickly.

"Yes, you are," he said. "You haven't been here long enough to—to look like the rest of us." And now harshness crept into his voice. "The sun and wind and cold haven't had a chance to dry out your skin and wrinkle your face and make your eyes squint. You're beautiful and fresh—like a child."

"Ron," she said, shocked at the bitterness in his voice, "what is it? Don't you like this country?"

"Yes, I like it," he returned. "I couldn't be happy any place else, I reckon. Ranching's in my bood. Guess I was thinkin' of Mart, my older brother. He's dead, you know."

RON left her abruptly, climbed into the buggy and drove away.

Frowning, Susan went into the house. What had there been about Mart's death, she wondered, that now cast a shadow over his younger brother? She determined to question Tina sometime soon. Tina would surely tell her the entire story of Martin Davis.

Monday afternoon, Susan asked Tina to stay in at recess time to help arrange the books in the bookcase. The child's blue eyes shone happily as she limped across the room and began to set the books in order.

"I like to do things for you, Miss Warren," she said.

"Tina," Susan asked casually, "why haven't you told me that you had another brother?"

"Oh, Mart?" A veiled look came into Tina' eyes. "Mart died three years ago next spring."

"I'm sorry," Susan said kindly. "Ron mentioned his name the other night. Was Mart ill for a long time?"

"Mart," Tina said in a small voice, "took to drinking. He was—killed."

Susan put an arm about the child's thin shoulders. "Forgive me, Tina. I've no business being so inquisitive."

"It's all right," Tina said, smiling up at her. "I don't mind telling you, Miss Warren."

Susan knew she had learned only a little of the story of Martin Davis, but she resolved not to ask the child, or anyone, any more questions. Whatever the story was, it was none of her business.

The next Sunday, Ron came to the McGill ranch to continue Susan's riding lessons. He said no more about his brother, and Susan carefully avoided the subject. Being with Ron was something she liked and she wanted nothing to spoil it.

"There's another dance comin' up," Ron said as they rode back toward the ranch in the fading twilight. "This time at the Hartly ranch. Eighteen miles by team and buggy. Three by horseback, cuttin' through the Devil's Graveyard. How about us goin' horseback?"

"Fine!" she answered.

"A rough trail," he said, "but you'll

make it all right. Besides, I want you to see the graveyard by moonlight. Of course, it's not a real graveyard. Just a strip of badlands and washes, but it's something to see when there's a full moon."

A few minutes later, he said good-by and rode homeward.

"Didn't he ever hear of kissing a girl good-by?" she wondered a little sadly.

He came to take her to the dance just at sundown, and they rode through the badlands in the graying dusk. There was a sinister something about the place that made her shudder.

"I don't like it, Ron," she said. "It's frightening; a little out of this world, all those towering rock formations and tumbled piles of shale.'

"That's why they call it the Devil's Graveyard," he said and grinned. "But wait till you see it on our way home."

A full moon hung in the sky as they rode homeward through the washes. Susan caught her breath. What had been towering monsters in the gray twilight now made up a hushed wonderland of gleaming castles and silent cities.

"Like it?" he asked.

"It's beautiful beyond belief, Ron," she whispered.

He rode up beside her, found her hand and held it. This was the first time he had ever touched her, except to help her in and out of the buggy, or to mount a horse. The pressure of his big fingers sent her heart pounding.

I'm in love with the guy! she thought. Have been for days.

"I shall never forget tonight, Ron," she said at last.

"Neither will I," he declared.

THEY came to the McGill ranchhouse, dismounted and walked slowly to the front porch. Neither of them were quite ready for this night to end.

At last, he said, "Good-night, Susan," and turned to leave.

"Ron," she said softly, "kiss me good-night."

For a moment, he stood rigid with his back to her. Then he swung about, took her in his arms and kissed her fiercely.

"I've been wanting to do that ever since the first time I saw you," he said unsteadily.

"Then why haven't you?" she asked breathlessly.

"I guess I was afraid," he answered. "Didn't seem right for me to kiss you, Susan. To make love to you. What have I got to offer a girl like you?"

"A girl like me doesn't ask for much," she said gently. "A home, perhaps—I've never really had a home of my own, Ron. My parents died when I was very young, and I lived with an aunt. She was kind, but it wasn't my home. And the right man to love, Ron."

He kissed her again and again; then drew away, and when he spoke, his voice was harsh. "This is a hard land, Susan," he said. "Blizzards in the winters. Too dry and hot in summers. Wind and dust and loneliness. Days when you don't see anyone. It turns women old before their time. Sometimes they hate this country!"

He hurried away, his strides long and angry.

"Ron, wait," she called, but he leaped into the saddle and rode into the night.

She could not understand his sudden change of mood. Puzzled and frightened, she went into the dark, silent house and crept to her room.

Doesn't he realize that when a woman loves a man, loneliness and dust and blizzards don't mean anything? she thought almost angrily. Why did he say those things to me?

She could find no right answer to her question, and then she remembered that he had not said he loved her. A tired, small girl a cold, sick lump in her heart, she undressed and went to bed. The wind came up and began to wail about the ranch house, and some place far away, a coyote howled at the moon. She burried her face in the pillow and wept silently.

Days passed during which she saw

nothing more of Ron, for Mr. Davis brought Tina to school and came after her. Ron, Tina said, was busy on the range.

Sundays came and went, and Ron did not appear at theMcGill ranch to ride with Susan. She did not try to fool herself about all this. Ron was staying away from her.

Then one Monday, Tina invited Susan to spend a night at the Davis ranch. "Any time you want to come will be all right," she said.

It was a chance to see Ron, perhaps learn why he had so suddenly stopped seeing her, yet Susan hesitated to take it. If he wanted to see her, he could surely find time to come to her.

"Please do!" Tina implored. "We all want you to."

"All right," Susan said, suddenly making up her mind. "Tomorrow night if it's all right with your mother."

That evening Susan told Mrs. McGill about the invitation.

"That's nice," the woman smiled. Then, frowning slightly, "I wouldn't say anything about Mart to 'em if I was you. His death was a terrible shock to 'em."

Oh, why don't you tell me all about Mart? Susan thought; but there was something in the woman's eyes that held her from asking questions.

It was Ron who came for Susan and Tina that next day. Grinning boyishly, he lifted Tina to the high seat of the buggy and then helped Susan up.

"Hold your hats, gals," he said, climbing in. "It's a long trip, and we don't want to keep Mom waitin' supper."

He seemed as shyly friendly as ever. But, Susan realized, he had been very careful to place Tina on the seat between himself and Susan.

ALL during the long ride, there was a feeling of wrongness in her heart. She was in love with him, and she was almost sure he loved her, yet now he seemed afraid to touch her or meet her eyes.

The sun had turned to a red ball of fire in the west before they arrived at the ranch. Mel Davis came hurrying from the barn to help Ron with the horses.

"Welcome, Miss Warren," he mumbled, his eyes warming at sight of her. "You and Tina run along to the house. Ron and I'll be along in a few minutes."

Susan followed Tina into the long, low ranchhouse and for the first time met the child's mother.

Mrs. Davis was a tall, angular woman with tired eyes set in a kind but worn face.

"Glad to have you in our home, Miss Warren," she greeted pleasantly.

"Please, Mrs. Davis," Susan said smilingly, "don't call me Miss Warren. You make me feel—too much like a stranger."

"All right," the woman said, beaming. "While you're my guest, I'll call you Susan. Tina's been wanting to invite you for weeks. She thinks the sun rises and sets in you."

"Tina's sweet," Susan said warmly.

The evening passed pleasantly enough, but Susan had no chance to be alone with Ron. And she had a feeling of being studied and analyzed by Ron's mother and father.

Like a strange, unknown species of insect, she thought.

Many times she caught the Davises watching her closely and she didn't miss their quick exchange of glances when Ron dropped down on the floor at her feet to show her how to braid the frayed ends of a lariat.

Perhaps they don't like this thing between me and Ron, she thought unhappily. They're weighting me in their minds against some other girl and finding me wrong for Ron.

"You see," Ron broke into her abstraction, holding up the rope, "it's easy if you know how."

Susan took the rope, and for a moment, their fingers touched.

"I'll show you to your room, Susan," Mrs. Davis said abruptly. "We have to

get up early, and that means to bed early."

The woman lit a lamp and led the way into a low beamed, pleasant room. The furniture appeared almost unused, and Susan was surprised at the expensiveness of the things about her.

"What a lovely room!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Davis carefully set the lamp on a walnut dresser. "This was Martin and Edith's room," she said tonelessly. "Edith liked nice things."

"Oh, was your son married?" Susan said in surprise, and then wanted to bite her tongue out.

But the woman seemed not to mind the question.

"Yes, he was married. Martin's dead, you know." The woman faced Susan then, and a hard glint came into her eyes. "He was killed in a gun fight. Some people say he was to blame, but he wasn't. He couldn't help doin' what he did any more than you can help bein' pretty and sweet!"

The woman's voice choked off. "I'm sorry, Miss War— Susan," she muttered and fled from the room.

For a moment, Susan was too stunned to move. Then her eyes fixed on a framed photograph standing on the dresser. Lifting the photograph, she saw a young couple smiling out at her. A man who reminded her of Ron, and a very pretty girl. Martin Davis and Edith, Susan knew. Still studying the photograph, she sank down on the edge of the bed. What, she wondered, had become of Edith?

Ron didn't show up at breakfast the next morning.

"Winter's just around the corner," Mel Davis said to Susan, "and there's still a lot to be done before snow falls. Ron's already gone to the east range to see about some cattle, so I'll take you and Tina to school."

PERHAPS that explained Ron's absense this morning, but it didn't explain why a barrier had arisen between them. Her hopes of being alone with him a few minutes vanished, and the good food she was eating suddenly turned tasteless in her mouth.

And now, a few days later, the ache in her heart was stronger than ever as she trudged homeward this winter day from school.

She lifted her eyes. A lamp winked at her through the early darkness. She had reached the McGill house, scarcely aware of walking the two miles. Now, for the first time, she realized she was half frozen. Shivering, she ran into the warm front room.

"It's getting colder outside," she announced.

"Might be in for a blizzard," Fred McGill muttered, staring through the darkening window. "If you should ever get caught at school in a blizzard, Susan, don't try to come home. Just stay there till someone comes after you."

"And don't let the children start home unless someone comes for them," Mrs. McGill warned. "A body can get lost in a blizzard mighty easy and freeze to death."

As she walked to school the next morning, the sun touched her face, but she could feel no warmth from it. By the time she reached the schoolhouse, her legs were numb with cold, and the sun was lost behind gray clouds scuttling out of the northwest. For a moment, she stood under the ragged old cottonwood, listening to the creak of the dead limbs. This old tree should be cut down before it blew over and hurt someone, she thought uneasily.

Turning her face from the biting wind, she crossed to the door and went in. The room was icy. She started the fire and went to the woodshed beyond the tree for more fuel. Arms loaded, she stumbled back to the school building. Again the sun shone, only to disappear completely. The wind howled, and windows rattled.

Only seven children came that morning. They were restless and kept turning their eyes in a worried way toward the windows.

Just before noon, Tina Davis lifted her hand.

"It's beginning to snow, Miss Warren," she said.

Susan stepped to a window. Powder fine snow washed across the flattened brown grass. She could feel the cold filtering in around the panes. Her small fingers nervously twisted at the bright curtains, and fear tightened about her heart. But when she faced the wide-eyed children, she was smiling.

"I'll pack in some more wood," big Joe Simms murmured.

Without asking for permission, he slid into his coat and went out. The wind tore the door from his fingers and hurled it shut. A minute later, he returned with an armload of fire wood. His long nose was cherry red from the bitter cold.

"Pa just drove up," he said. "Come to take me home." His troubled eyes fixed themselves on Susan's face. "Pa says this may be the beginnin' of a blizzard, Miss Warren."

She smiled at him. "Don't keep your father waiting, Joe. You have a long way to go, you know."

Joe left, and Susan watched Mr. Simms' light springwagon pull away. It disappeared with startling abruptness in a swirl of snow.

At noon, more parents arrived and departed with their children.

"Looks like we might be in for a bad spell, Miss Warren," a rancher said anxiously. "You'd better get home as soon as you can."

By two o'clock, only Tina was left with Susan.

"This is fun," the child said, laughing. "I like being the only pupil."

Susan went to a window and drew back the curtains. The woodshed was a faint blur against the driving snow.

If Tina could only walk from here to the McGills' ranch, she thought, I'd leave a note for Mr. Davis and take her with me right away.

She went back to the stove and put more wood on the fire.

FOUR o'clock came. Tina limped to the window, and stood staring out between the curtains.

"It's awful," she said, and fear filled her voice. "I can't even see the woodshed."

Susan hurried across the room and put an arm about Tina's thin shoulders. "Don't worry, darling. Someone will be after you soon."

The wind shifted, and a little drift of snow began to form on the window sill. The room grew dim and chill. Susan glanced at her watch. It was not yet five, and darkness had begun to move in.

"I'd better bring in more wood before it gets any darker," she said.

She put on her coat and stepped outside. The snow stung her face like hard driven sand. Head bowed, she stumbled forward, glanced back and knew sudden terror. The schoolhouse had disappeared.

She stood very still. "Don't get panicky," she warned herself.

Then she saw the building, but not where she expected it to be. She knew then that she had lost her sense of direction and to attempt to find the woodshed was a danger not worth the risk. She returned to the schoolhouse and went in.

"You didn't bring any wood," Tina said.

Susan smiled at her. "No. I think we have enough to last until your father comes."

She took the lamp from the top of the bookcase, lit it and stood it on a desk close to a window. Outside, there was only the wind and snow and cold. And the growing, terrifying darkness.

"It's getting cold," Tina said, shivering.

"Put on your coat," Susan told her, "and I'll read you a story."

Just as she finished the story, Ron arrived. He came with a great stamping of feet, shut the door behind him and blinked at the light.

"Don't ask me how I ever found this place," he gasped. "I don't know myself.

Luck, I guess."

He sank down on a chair and pulled off his fur cap.

"Left home hours ago, horseback. Ran into some drifts, and the horse floundered. Got him back on his feet and he got away. That's what happens when your horse picks up a stone and goes lame, and you have to ride a half-wild bronc." He stood and stepped over to the cold stove. "Looks like I'd better bring in some wood."

He turned toward the door.

"Ron," Susan said, "can you find the woodshed?"

He grinned down at her. "Can I find it? When I went to school here, the teacher made me the official wood-packer-in. I used to walk there and back with my eyes shut just to see if I could. Can I find it? What a question!"

Pulling his cap over his ears, he stepped outside.

Susan went to the door, opened it a crack and stared into the swirling blackness. A gust of wind flung the door against her shoulder, making her stagger back.

At that moment, she heard the dead cottonwood crash.

She stood by the door, listening, waiting, trembling a little. She glanced at her watch presently. Ron had been gone five minutes. Fear squeezed at her heart.

He's lost, she thought. No—the tree! He must have reached it about the time it crashed. You've got to go see—but how can you find your way back?

She stared wide-eyed about the room. A curtain fluttered in a drafty window.

"Tina," she cried, "help me!"

She began tearing the curtains from the windows as she told Tina what to do. They ripped the curtains into strips and tied them end to end. Then Susan fastened one end of the long crude rope to her slender waist.

"Watch it, Tina," she said. "When I come to the end of it, give a jerk so I'll stop now. When I give two jerks, it means I want to return, so you keep pulling the strips tight. But not hard enough to tear them. Understand?"

HER small face white but composed, Tina nodded.

The wind almost swept Susan off her feet as she fought her way toward where she believed the old cottonwood to be. Suddenly her sense of direction was lost. She stumbled about blindly and ran up against the side of the schoolhouse. She stood a moment, her face burried in her arms against the building, getting her breath.

Again she plunged ahead in her blind search. Something struck her a stinging blow in the face. She reached forward and wrapped her fingers about a limb of the fallen tree.

"Ron," she screamed, but the wind hurled the words away.

She dropped to hands and knees and groped about. At last, she found him. He lay with a limb across his chest. Her fingers touched his face. A warm stickiness lay on his forehead.

Afterwards, she was never sure how she got him from under the limb and back to the schoolhouse. Tina opened the door and helped her drag him inside. He opened his eyes suddenly and grinned faintly up at them.

"Never stand under a dead tree when the wind's blowin'," he said.

Then he tried to sit up and winced with pain. "Leg busted?" he asked.

"No," Susan told him. "It's your ankle. You must have twisted it when you fell."

The night wore on. Susan made three trips to the fallen tree, broke off dead limbs and dragged them into the building. She started the fire with pages torn from some of her books, and warmth crept back into the building.

Tina curled up on the floor by the stove and slept fitfully. Ron sat huddled by the fire, muttering angrily about his helplessness. Susan kept the fire going, heated water, cleaned the cut on Ron's forehead and bathed his swollen ankle.

"I'm sure a lot of help," he kept muttering disgustedly.

"*Shush!*" Susan smiled. "Just having a man around is a great comfort."

"Now you're makin' fun of me," he said, his eyes fixed searchingly on her face. "Susan—"

"Hang on to this curtain rope affair," she said. "We need more fuel."

WITH the coming of morning, the wind let up. Exhausted, Susan dropped down on a chair near the stove.

"Someone'll be along, lookin' for us before long," Ron said, sitting up. "While we're still alone, I'd like to tell you something."

He reached up, caught her hand and drew her down beside him.

"Edith Dayton was a city girl who came out here one summer to visit relatives," he went on. "She was awful pretty, Susan, and Mart fell in love with her. They got married. Things went all right at first, but Edith didn't belong here. The heat and dryness. The cold—and blizzards like this one. The wind and loneliness and a rancher's life didn't fit her. She couldn't take it, Susan.

"One day, she pulled out. Ran away with another man. Mart went to pieces after that. Drank. Picked a fight one night in town and was shot and killed."

"Why are you telling me this, Ron?" she asked.

"Because," he answered hollowly, "you reminded us of Edith. You're like her in lots of ways. Pretty, not very big, afraid of horses, new to this country. You—"

His voice trailed off.

"I see," she said, anger coming into her voice. "Your father and mother were afraid I couldn't take it. They thought there'd come a time when I'd run away just as Edith did. Well, maybe I would have."

She tried to get to her feet, tried to free her hands, but he held her close to him.

"No, you wouldn't," he said. "You're not like Edith on the inside. If she'd been in your place tonight, she would've gone crazy with fear, and we'd all frozen to death. I love you, Susan. I want you!"

"Oh, Ron," she said, fighting to keep the anger in her voice, "if you'd really loved me, you wouldn't have listened to your father and mother."

"That's the whole trouble," he said miserably. "I didn't listen to 'em. They were for you. I was the one who was against you."

"I don't understand," she said weakly.

"I kept rememberin' Edith and what happened to her. This is a hard land, Susan. I saw it break Edith. I didn't want anything like that to happen to you, I loved you so much. Don't you see? I didn't know how strong you were until last night. Now I know you've got the same strength that my mother has, and Fred McGill's wife, and the other women in this country. This, or no other land, could ever break you. Small but mighty, that's you, Susan, and I'm not half good enough for you."

"Don't talk like an idiot!" she said sharply.

And then her weariness and happiness were too much for her, and she was crying and laughing a little at the same time and holding her face up for his kisses.

A minute, or an hour later, she never knew for sure which it was, shouts lifted above the silence about them. Ron released her then.

"I'm afraid we're about to be rescued," he said, smiling. "But first, will you marry me, Susan?"

"Oh, Ron," she whispered, "Of course, I will!"

Tina stirred, opened her eyes. "Why, Ron, Susan," she cried happily, "You must be in love, the way you're acting."

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Next Issue: QUEEN OF THE WINTER RANGE, a Novelet by Giff Cheshire

The Tongue-Tied Cowboy

Bill had a Winchester and Jarvis drew his gold-plated six-gun

by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Bad luck comes in batches for Bill Price when he has a passel of problems to solve—and a girl's heart to win!

THEY had held the Pothook cattle here at Dead Horse Spring for three days, and the buyer, Sam Badger, hadn't shown up. Bill Price had a hunch he wouldn't, for Badger was the kind who respected neither God nor man. He had consistently defied Ute treaty rights, sneered at their traditions, trampled their pride into Colorado's dust. Now, with twilight marking the end of the third day of waiting, it was Bill's guess that Badger had finally lost his hair.

If Mel Jarvis had been a million miles away, Bill wouldn't have minded the waiting, for, as usual, Lissa Kane had

come along. Every summer for the last three years, Bill had helped drive a small herd of three-year-olds from the Blue Mountains up here to the western shoulder of the La Sal range where Badger met them and made his deal with old Soogan Kane, the Pothook owner.

This year, however, everything was different. Soogan was in bed with a broken leg. The rustlers had been bad, so most of the Pothook hands had been kept at home. To make it complete, Soogan owed a note at the bank and was depending on this herd to bring in enough to pay it off.

Bad luck, according to Bill, always came in batches. Sam Badger's failure to show up was part of this batch. Jarvis being along was more of the same, and that was a chunk he could lay at Lissa's door, a fact which made him mad every time he thought about it.

A week before old Soogan had called Bill in and said, "Four days from now I've got to have a hundred head of three-year-olds at Dead Horse Spring. We're short handed, so I'm just sending you and Lissa and Mel. You're running the outfit and you'll do the dickering with Badger."

Bill rolled a smoke, not meeting Soogan's eyes. He didn't argue about Jarvis going, but he was dead sure it was a mistake to send him. He'd had a hunch from the first that Jarvis was a crook, but it would take more than a hunch to change Soogan Kane's mind.

Now Sam Badger was a different proposition. Everybody knew he'd steal the gold right out of your teeth if you held your mouth open, so he was treated accordingly. Every summer for three years now Badger had trailed the Pothook herd he'd bought across the La Sals and on through Paradox Valley which was part of the Ute reservation.

SO FAR Badger had always gone through safely and delivered his herd to one of the San Juan mining camps, but Soogan allowed that sooner or later he'd have trouble.

Plumb foolish, Soogan claimed, to take chances when Badger could go around, but it saved time to follow the valley, and Badger was the kind who figured that one white man was as good as Mancos Jim and his whole band of braves.

"Ain't you got anybody else you can send except Jarvis?" Bill asked finally.

"Don't cotton to Mel, do you?" Soogan laughed. "Jealous on account of him beating you out with Lissa?"

"Maybe, but whether I am or not, it ain't good business to let Lissa go, her being moon-eyed over that danged dude like she is."

"I couldn't keep her here if I wanted to," Soogan said, "and you know it. Anyhow, I ain't worried. I know Lissa."

Bill sat there awhile, thinking how Mel Jarvis had ridden in a month before, singing "Clementine" in that pretty tenor voice of his, dressed up as if he were headed for a Saturday night dance. He had silver foofaraw on his chaps, gun-belt and saddle, a gold-plated Colt, a green silk shirt, and a cream-colored Stetson that must have set him back more than a month's wages.

Bill had to admit he was jealous. What was more, his suspicion of Jarvis was just a hunch. He never had cottoned to a man who called himself a cowhand and dressed like a dude. To top everything else, Jarvis had white teeth and a sweet smile that was enough to curdle a man's supper, not to mention a way of wearing his hair long without looking too long.

Lissa had gone sweet on Jarvis the first minute she saw him. Bill knew because he was standing with her at the horse trough when Jarvis rode up. He stopped singing, flashed his smile, and lifting his fine hat, said, "You must be Lissa Kane. They told me you were the prettiest girl in Utah, and I can see they were right."

Lissa's mouth popped open. Then her blue eyes began to shine. She liked it. Bill saw that and started to sizzle. He'd

worked for Pothook for three years, and he'd loved Lissa every day of those years. He'd taken her to dances and on rides up into the timber, but he'd never been able to work up enough gumption to ask her to marry him. He just couldn't think up pretty words the way Mel Jarvis could.

Ordinarily, Soogan would have kicked a man plumb off Pothook range who wore the kind of duds Jarvis did, but Lissa put in on Jarvis' side when he asked for a job, so Soogan hired him. Lissa had a way of wrapping the old man around her finger.

It made Bill sick, watching Lissa get mushy just looking at Jarvis. She even started wearing her party dress in the evenings when she went walking with him.

Then there was that first Saturday night. Bill had hitched up the buggy to take Lissa to the dance the way he always did, but just as he drove up to the house, Lissa came out with Jarvis. Bill yelled, "I'm taking her, Purty Boy. Get."

"Not tonight you aren't," Lissa said. "You didn't even ask me."

"I never do," Bill cried indignantly, "but I always take you."

"Thanks for hitching up," Jarvis said in his fine manner. "Now move out of the way."

That did it. Bill took a swing at Jarvis' grinning mouth, intent on knocking one of his white teeth loose, but the mouth didn't stay there. In the next three minutes Bill took the quickest licking he'd ever taken in his life. He tried it two more times the next week, but it always turned out the same. Jarvis was as hard to hit as a spring breeze, but he packed a wallop in either fist that was like the kick of a Missouri mule.

Bill knew as well as anybody that all his trouble with Jarvis didn't make the man a crook. Still, it seemed mighty funny that he'd ride in asking for a job at thirty a month and beans. He just didn't look like that kind.

The only way to prove anything to Soogan Kane, was to get good sound evidence, and three days of waiting for Sam Badger hadn't produced any such evidence.

BUT it did prove one thing. Soogan didn't know Lissa as well as he thought he did. She stayed in camp, humming to herself and smiling a little and acting as if she knew something that made her mighty happy. It looked to Bill as if she was fixing to run off with Jarvis, and that was the worst thing Bill could think of.

Every evening had followed the same pattern. Bill hunkered on one side of the fire, smoking. Jarvis sang. Right now he was in the middle of "Sweet Bunch Of Violets." In a minute or two he'd start on "Gathering the Myrtle with Mary." Lissa was lying back on her elbows, eyes almost closed as she listened. Bill could just see her head and shoulders and the curve of her breasts from where he sat. Pretty, Bill thought, mighty pretty. Then he remembered he'd lost her to Mel Jarvis and he was sick.

There had been a strange poignant ache inside Bill right from the day Jarvis had first showed up. Lissa was twenty, young enough to be impressionable and old enough to think she knew what she wanted. It wasn't fair to Bill, with his flat nose and brown hair and liberal coating of freckles, to have to compete for a girl's love with a dude like Mel Jarvis. But the way it had turned out, he hadn't given Jarvis much competition.

Whatever happened, Bill wanted Lissa to be happy, but he knew as well as he knew anything that Jarvis wasn't the man for the job. Still, there didn't seem to be much he could do about it, for Lissa had a lot of her father's stubbornness once she'd made up her mind. Bill was trying to think of something, and Jarvis was just starting "Gathering the Myrtle with Mary" when they heard the horse coming down the mountain.

Bill jumped at the fire, saying, "Shut up, Jarvis," as he swung a boot through the coals. Lissa began, "What's the matter—" but Jarvis pulled her back into the shadows, whispering, "Someone's coming."

"Get back into the rocks," Bill said softly.

"I'm staying here," she said.

"Better move back," Jarvis urged. "You're too pretty to get cut up by a stray slug."

She went then, and the ache in Bill worked up into his chest so he had to labor for every breath. Lissa would do anything Jarvis asked her, but if Bill opened his mouth, she rammed a boot down his throat.

They waited, hearing the horse plunge down the trail at a reckless pace. Bill had his Winchester in his hands, and Jarvis had pulled his gold-plated six-gun. A moment later Bill glimpsed the horse coming out of the cedars. The rider was tall and skinny, but the light was too pale to see his face. He swung down at the waterhole, calling, "Soogan! You around?"

It was Laredo, one of Sam Badger's men. "All right," Bill said. "Come on out, Lissa. Take it easy, Jarvis." He raised his voice, shouting, "Over here, Laredo. Soogan's home with a busted leg, but we've got the beef."

Laredo laughed, a rasping humorless sound. His voice trembled when he said, "You can chouse 'em back. Sam won't be buying no more beef."

Bill threw an armful of cedar limbs on the coals. They flamed up as Laredo led his sweat-gummed horse toward the fire. "Got any coffee?"

Bill motioned toward the pot. "Help yourself."

Laredo saw Lissa then. "Howdy, ma'am," he said. His gaze brushed Jarvis and swung to Bill. "You running the outfit?"

"Yeah," Bill answered, wondering if Lissa would contradict him. "What happened to Sam?"

Laredo filled a tin cup with coffee. "You can guess. Mancos Jim's band is in the valley madder'n blazes because they're being moved out next week. Sam was late starting from Telluride, so he was traveling fast and careless. He's dead. So's two of his men." He drank the coffee and threw the cup down in a sudden wild motion. "They'd have got me if I'd been with 'em, but my horse went lame and I was behind the rest. Nothing I could do. You hear? Nothing."

"Sam should have waited," Bill said tonelessly. "That dead-line's only a week off."

LAREDO laughed again, the same rasping sound. "Ever hear of Sam waiting five minutes on account of a band of filthy Utes?" He wheeled toward his horse. "I'm going. I aim to keep on riding till I forget what Sam looked like with his hair gone."

Laredo swung into his saddle. "Tell Soogan he lost a pile of dinero. Sam was figgering on offering seventy dollars a head. Men are swarming into Telluride by the thousands and they're sure beef hungry." Then Laredo reined his tired horse around and quirted him into a run.

"He'll kill that animal," Bill said angrily.

"The man's loco," Jarvis said. "Know him, Price?"

Bill nodded. "He's been with Badger for years."

"He said men were swarming into Telluride by the thousands." Jarvis cleared his throat. "This is up to you. I savvy that, Price, but I keep thinking about Soogan and that note he owes." Then he stopped and shook his head. "No, I reckon it would be too dangerous."

"What is it, Mel?" Lissa asked.

"Well, I was thinking that if Badger aimed to pay seventy dollars a head here, they must be worth a lot more in Telluride. Why don't we drive on through ourselves?"

"No," Bill said sharply. "Them Utes have been buzzing like hornets ever

since the Meeker massacre."

"But Mancos Jim doesn't stay in the valley," Lissa cried. "He's probably gone on over the plateau by now, so we wouldn't . . ."

"No."

Suddenly Lissa's cheeks were scarlet. "Bill," she cried angrily, "we're going to try it. It's the only way to save Pothook."

"Then you're going back home."

"We've got to have three riders," she said doggedly, "and we haven't got time to wait for the deadline. We haven't got time to wait for more hands from home, either. Dad expected Badger three days ago, and he thought we'd be home with the money by now. The only thing we can do is to push our herd as fast as we can."

Bill swung on Jarvis. "I oughtta break your neck for saying anything about it."

"Don't you lay a hand on him," Lissa cried.

Jarvis laughed. "He's tried."

This was past the laying of hands. Bill knew what Soogan would say. Lissa was a lot more important to the old man than Pothook. If she went on, there was a good chance she'd lose her long black hair. Well, there was one thing Bill could do. He had no way of knowing how fast Jarvis was with his gun, but a man who was handy with his fists might be good with a six. Anyhow, with Lissa's life at stake, Bill couldn't afford to run any risk.

Taking his time, Bill moved toward the coffee pot and filled a tin cup. Lissa demanded, "Are you going to follow orders?"

"We'd better wait till sunup," Bill answered.

"Well, that's better. Sometimes you're—"

Bill had his cup in his left hand. Without warning, he made a quick half turn and pulled gun. "No, we ain't doing no such crazy trick," he said hotly. "I don't know what this slick-talking dude had in his noggin—" Then the sky fell on Bill, and he pitched forward on his face, gun dribbling from his hand.

He was out for a long time. Once he came to with the moon far down in the west, the sky a starry glitter above him. He got to his feet, head aching with great cracking throbs. The rocks around him began to spin and his knees gave and again the earth came up to meet him.

IT WAS full daylight when Bill came to the second time. He crawled to the water hole, drank, and doused his face. He lay there for a time, feeling the shocking beat of his headache. Even now in the early morning, the sun was hammering the desert with man-killing blows.

There was no shade except that from the grotesquely-shaped sandstone rocks, honed into all sorts of spires and arches by the erosive wind. He crawled back among the rocks and lay there, his mind slowly digging into his consciousness for memory of the things that had happened.

He still had his gun. They had not taken his brown saddle horse, and some food had been left beside the charred remnants of the fire, but the herd was gone. He rose, grabbing at a projection of rock to steady himself until the dizziness passed. Then he lurched back to the place where he had lain when he had recovered consciousness, and saw Lissa's note:

> Go home and tell Dad what we've done. Laredo got hungry and came back. We've got three riders, so we'll make out fine.
>
> Lissa

Bill made a fire and cooked breakfast, trying to make some sense out of what had happened. Laredo must have been the one who knocked him out, for both Lissa and Jarvis had been in front of him, but for Laredo to have come back because he was hungry was the craziest thing Bill had ever heard. The man had been almost hysterical from fear and horror when he had stopped for a cup of coffee.

He finished eating, caught up his horse, and saddled. Still he could make no sense out of this except that Laredo had done a fine job of playacting. That probably meant Sam Badger still had his hair and Mancos Jim and his band might not be within a hundred miles of Paradox Valley.

Bill turned his horse upslope. His head still hurt, but he felt better. At least, he told himself savagely, he could shoot straight. The first thing he'd do when he met up with Mel Jarvis and Laredo would be to start shooting.

An hour later Bill was in the pines. He rounded a twist in the trail, and almost ran into Laredo. Both grabbed guns and fired. Laredo must have been the most surprised, for his shot missed by a foot, but Bill's caught the tall man in the chest and knocked him out of his saddle. Bill rode toward him, cocked gun on him.

For a moment Bill thought Laredo was dead, but when he swung down and knelt in the thick blanket of pine needles, Laredo's eyes flickered open. He breathed, "Badger sent me back to beef you. Wants to leave you beside the girl so folks will think Injuns done it. Better —hurry—" He tried to finish his sentence, but death blotted out his words.

Bill swung back into saddle and went on up the trail, anger growing into a terrible rage. Sam Badger aimed to steal the herd, and Jarvis had been a part of the scheme all the time. But it was still guesswork. Even if Bill got down the other side in time, Badger might not have tipped his hand yet, and Lissa would not believe Jarvis had any part in it.

He held to a steady pace, often stepping down and running beside his horse to rest him, and all the time the one thought lay in the back of his mind like a chill blade: He might not be in time!

The hot sun was swinging westward, its light sharp upon the long descending sweep of the cedar and pinon-covered slopes behind him. Then he was in the quaking aspens, tiny leaves turning in the hot breeze, and within the hour he was over the top and swinging down the trail that dropped rapidly into the Paradox Valley.

Hour after hour, with his fear for Lissa's life torturing him every minute. He went on at a reckless pace, seeing below him the great trough that was Paradox Valley running for miles to the east, its red and yellow and buff cliffs rising on both sides, walls chiseled by the forces of nature out of the sandstone.

Bill was close to the herd now, and every moment he expected to glimpse the drag and Badger or some of his men. He kept his right hand close to gun-butt, eyes searching the slope below him for sign of movement. Then, almost at the bottom, he reached a sharp ledge just above the valley floor. He reined up, saw the herd spreading out across the flat, and panic struck him. A band of Utes had pulled up a hundred yards or more from the foot of the trail, and the chief, Mancos Jim, was palavering with Mel Jarvis.

It seemed to Bill he could hear the pounding of his heart. His lungs refused to work. In that one sweeping glance he could not see Lissa or Badger or any of his men. Just Jarvis, sitting straight-backed in his saddle, and squat Mancos Jim, a dozen or more braves fanned out behind him.

DIRECTLY below him, Bill suddenly saw them. Lissa had her hands and feet tied, while Sam Badger, with two of his cowhands, hunkered behind a sandstone upthrust. The Indians couldn't see them, but apparently Badger had found a crack wide enough for him to watch the talk between Jarvis and the Ute chief.

If Mancos Jim discovered Badger, it would mean the end of all of them. Bill couldn't guess what Jarvis was telling the Ute chief, but for the moment the Indians' attention was on Jarvis. So was Badger's, and that gave Bill his chance to reach the bottom. Turning

back into the trail, he swung down the last loop and pulled up behind the cover of a tall rock. Jerking Winchester from the boot, he stepped down and edged forward. An involuntary breath of relief burst out of him. The Utes had turned and were headed out across the valley.

Escape, but only from one danger. Mel Jarvis was riding back toward the sandstone upthrust. Badger poked his head into view, calling, "What'd you tell 'em, Mel?"

"Stay out of sight, you fool," Jarvis cried. "Have you lost all the brains you ever had?"

Badger said something in an angry tone, but he dropped back. A moment later Jarvis had swung in behind the upthrust. Bill didn't stop to consider the odds, for this was as good a chance as he'd have. He ducked around the rock and lunged toward the sandstone barrier that hid Badger and the others.

For twenty yards he was in the open. If any of them had been watching, they'd have cut him down with a single shot, but he reached the upthrust, and stopped, panting. Then he heard Badger's angry voice, "Don't be a fool Jarvis. What does the girl mean to you?"

"I'm no woman killer," Jarvis shot back, "and I won't stand for it."

"You're a little late," Badger mocked. "You knew the deal."

"I didn't know all you were up to. Stealing cows is one thing. This is something else."

Bill pulled gun and moved around the end of the upthrust. "That's right, Jarvis," he said. "Reach, Badger!"

Badger cursed, and started to lift his hands, but the two men behind him weren't reaching for the sky—their hands were sweeping guns from holsters. The next moment .45's were talking, but the odds were three to two, not four to one as Bill had expected, for Mel Jarvis cut Sam Badger down with his first shot.

Bill laced a bullet through one of the outlaw's heads, took a slug along his side that gouged out a long slice of skin. Then he got the third one through the chest, and that finished it. He swung to Jarvis, gun still palmed, but Mel Jarvis had holstered his Colt, the grin he gave Bill something different than the sweet smile Bill had seen on his lips so many times.

"For once I'm glad to see you, Price," Jarvis said. "We done purty well."

Still not fully trusting him, Bill moved sideward until he reached Lissa. He dropped to his knees, pulled his knife out, and with his gun still on Jarvis, slashed the ropes that bound Lissa's hands and feet. Right then he might as well have dropped his gun because Lissa was crying and kissing him, her arms around his neck so tight that she almost choked him.

Bill might have imagined it, but it seemed to him she acted more like a woman who had almost lost the man she loved. Anyhow, it was mighty pleasant, and he wound up by putting his gun down and using both arms.

JARVIS brought horses up and lifting the dead men into the saddles, tied them there and led them back around the upthrust so they would be out of Lissa's sight. Then he returned and his voice was brittle hard when he said, "I love Lissa, but it's your pot if you've got sense enough to pull it in. How a man can be as blind as you are, or maybe just plain stupid, is beyond me."

"What are you getting at?" Bill demanded.

"Ask her." Jarvis jabbed a thumb at Lissa. "I'm riding."

"What got into Badger?" Bill asked.

"He lost his shirt in a deal this spring," Jarvis said, "so he figured on stealing the Pothook herd to get started again. He didn't know Soogan wouldn't be there, but he sent Laredo into camp to give that yarn about Badger being scalped. I was supposed to suggest going on to Telluride. It worked with Lissa, but it didn't with you. Laredo had sneaked back and laid his gun barrel

across your head. We pulled out right away and we've been shoving them critters ever since."

Jarvis cleared his throat, adding, "Badger paid me to get a job with Pothook, but I couldn't stomach it. Not after knowing Lissa. No reason why you two can't take this herd on up to Telluride now. You can get back to Pothook in time to meet that note. Mancos Jim won't come back. He's going on over the Uncompahgre Plateau to Fort Crawford like he's supposed to."

"What did you tell him?" Bill asked.

Jarvis grinned. "Told him these were my steers, and Badger wasn't with me. I used to live with the Utes. He believed me."

JARVIS walked back to the horses and a moment later Bill heard him ride away. Bill sat there looking at Lissa and she looked at him. All of a sudden it seemed that everything that had happened was a long way behind them and here he was alone with a girl he'd loved for three years. "I—" He cleared his throat. "I—well, what did he mean by saying I was blind. Or stupid."

"You're both," she said. "If a man can't propose in three years, he must be."

"But you've been crazy about Jarvis."

"I was not. If you had a lick of sense, you'd have seen that all I was doing was trying to make you get up and do something. You just took me for granted."

"I was trying to get some money saved," he began lamely.

"You could have told me you loved me. You didn't have enough nerve. You were a coward every time we came home from a dance. I had to get you started. Now I don't want to hear anything more about money."

"So I was a coward every time I brought you home from a dance, was I? Well, I'm a changed man."

"I don't believe you."

But she did. He proved it by a demonstration.

"Ma'am, How Come a Lady Like You Happens to Run a Cow Country Saloon?"

SMOKY MASON had never been so surprised in all his life. Tired, hungry, and broke, he had drifted into "Francia's Saloon and Restaurant," and accepted a job as a roustabout. The proprietress was a girl in her early twenties with flaming red hair, eyes as green as emeralds, a vividly red mouth. She wore half-boots and tightly fitting black velvet pantaloons, a black silk shirt, and around her left shoulder was looped a heavy leather whip.

Francia knew how to use the whip, too—and how to keep order in a salty cowtown saloon. She owned her own ranch, and could have sold the saloon at a good price when she inherited it. Why did she want the place? Why did she wear those attention-compelling clothes? Why was she willing to mingle with the roughest men of the Border?

"I'm waiting to get the men who murdered my brother," Francia finally explained to Smoky. "I figure they'll come back here, sooner or later, I'm waiting. And that's why I'm dressing and acting this way—I want talk about me and talk about my place. I hope the right people hear it sometime and get curious. I'm waiting!"

Ultimately, Smoky Mason became Francia's range boss and came to play an important part in her vengeance quest—in LOVE RIDES A STRANGE TRAIL, next issue's exciting featured novelet by A. Leslie. It's a yarn that packs romance and action from start to finish—a colorful, stirring saga of the rangeland that will hold you breathless! Look forward to this and other splendid stories of range hearts in our gala next issue!

OVER Whitecap RANGE

Jeff Wade and Peggy of the J G Ranch Fight Side

CHAPTER I

Bad Hombres

FOLLOWING a serious talk with Sheriff McAdams in Anderton, Jeff Wade hired a livery stable horse and rode out of town. Jeff's objective, the J G ranch, lay along Whitecap River. East of it, rugged foothills bulwarked majestic Whitecap Range, whose lofty peaks lifted serene heads against the star-studded horizon.

The chill of late autumn held this vast and silent land, but although it was after ten o'clock when he reached the J G, the main house was ablaze with lights, and the racket of drunken hilarity assailed Jeff's ears.

He stabled his horse and crossed the

A Novelet by STEPHEN PAYNE

Jeff and Peggy waited, peering at the men on the trail

yard to the living-room door, which was open. Paused in the beam of lamplight, he had his first look at four men and one robust woman who appeared to be as drunk as the men.

She must be Mrs. Addie Holcomb, the cook and housekeeper Sheriff McAdams had mentioned, and Jeff decided that a solid and uncouth hunk of man in bib overalls and work shoes was her husband, the choreman as well as the straw boss on the ranch. The other three fellows hadn't shucked off their guns, or shaved recently, or even washed their unlovely faces.

"Renegades," thought Jeff. "Scum of

by Side Against the Dread Menace of Rustler Foes!

the ranges. And the hatchet-faced cuss with squinted gray eyes is a killer."

The racket had stopped while the four passed a quart bottle. Then the hatchet-faced man said thickly, "All together now. Whoop it up!" He whipped out his six-shooter, fired two shots through the roof, and in unison the four howled like wolves.

A door on the far side of the room snapped open and Jeff saw a girl framed in it. Young and beautifully proportioned, she was a creamy-skinned blonde with tawny hair, pale cheeks and large blue eyes wide with alarm.

"Stop it!" she commanded. "Mrs. Holcomb, make them behave."

The housekeeper made a gurgling noise and said, "Aw, the boys is just having fun, dearie."

"Fun? They've wrecked this room and the kitchen. Holcomb, send your friends away."

"These rip-tootin' Westerners is Sid's friends he'd like for you to know," Holcomb retorted. "Lemme introduce you. Hatchet-faced gunhawk is One-Shot Dolan. Known far and wide as—"

"I don't want to meet them," the girl put in sharply impatient.

"—plenty bad medicine. Squatty geezer is Flat-Nose Jake, and the bucktoothed one—ain't he pretty?—is Bucktooth Bridger. Men, this lady's Miss Peggy Galenstock."

ALTHOUGH the three were hard cases, Jeff thought they would have shown respect for a woman if they hadn't been drunk. As it was, they goggled at Peggy Galenstock.

"We has heard about her," Dolan sneered. "A high-hat, eddicated dame from the East, too nice and tony to mix with us."

"Evenin', folks."

Jeff stepped into the room, and Peggy's eyes met his, astonishment rippling through her. She was not however so astonished as the four men.

"Who're you?" Holcomb got out.

Jeff fished a card from his billfold. "Jeff Wade. I'm here looking for cattle to buy. Where's Sidney Brooks, half owner and manager of this J G outfit?"

"On the roundup," Holcomb muttered.

"And you're in charge here while Sid is gone?"

"Well, yeh."

"Okay. You tell these three gentlemen to ride out. Right now!"

Complete silence, all eyes on Jeff, tall, wiry, hard-muscled, with dark hair, strong, rough-hewn features, shrewd brown eyes and, at the moment, tight, grim lips.

"You heard him, Dolan?" Holcomb muttered uncertainly, "Wh-what'll we do?"

One-Shot Dolan snatched the whiskey bottle off the table and leaped at Jeff, swinging it.

"Come on, boys," he shouted. "Eat him up!"

Jeff wasn't there as the bottle swished downward. He ducked, and as he came upright his right fist connected with Dolan's chin. The floor caught the gunman's body. Flat-Nose Jake lunged at Jeff, attempting to clamp him in his long arms, while Bucktooth reached for his gun. Jeff threw out one leg, tripped Jake, and he, too, sprawled on the floor.

Bucktooth had his gun clear of the holster when Jeff rammed into him, smashing him against one wall with savage fists. He folded up in the middle and lost his weapon. Jeff grabbed him, lifted him, hurled him down on top of the other two.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Holcomb had lurched into an adjoining room, and Peggy had armed herself with a wooden bed slat. As Jeff pivoted, looking for Holcomb, he saw the fellow bending to pick up the gun Bucktooth had lost, and he saw the girl, like a tawny-haired fury, come up behind the man and break the bed slat over his head.

Something resembling an electric spark flashed in Jeff's brain. She was the kind of girl of whom he could approve! He wheeled back to the three

men he had put down and pounced and came up out of the tangle of thrashing arms and legs with a total of three gun belts and two holstered .45's.

Holcomb sat on the floor blinking his eyes while Peggy menaced him with the broken slat.

"Behave, or I'll crack you again," she said.

Jeff whipped a Colt from one holster. "Sit still, roughnecks!" he snapped. "Holcomb!"

"Yeh? Yes, Mister?" stammered Holcomb, respect in his voice.

JEFF gave him a second swift sizing-up. The man was a coward. Now that his friends had been beaten, he would obey the victor.

"Those men don't really belong here?" Jeff demanded.

"No. They came this evenin'."

"Where're their horses?"

"Barn."

"Saddle 'em, Holcomb, and bring 'em up here. Pronto!"

Holcomb went out, running to the stable. Jeff called, "Peggy, see what that woman is doing. Grab that gun on the floor. If she's up to anything funny, threaten to shoot her."

Peggy Galenstock forged into the room where Mrs. Holcomb had disappeared. The three men on the floor were much too drunk to realize exactly what had happened, but not too stupefied to see that Jeff Wade had them covered.

Peggy returned and said, "She's keeled over on the bed. I couldn't wake her."

"Good enough. Lucky for us, lady, that these buzzards were so wobble-kneed they couldn't fight."

Her eyes were on him, studying him, weighing him. "I think, Jeff Wade, the way you tore into them you'd have handled them, drunk or sober," she said quietly. "There's Holcomb with the horses."

"Outside, you three," ordered Jeff.

The three men staggered out, and with difficulty mounted their horses.

"Don't come back here," Jeff called. "Later, I'll send your guns to the sheriff's office, and you can ask McAdams for 'em. Git!"

Hoofs beat into the night and eventually faded out to silence. Holcomb stood in the lane of light from the living-room door.

"Mr. Wade, what you goin' to do to me?" he asked anxiously.

Jeff shoved the man roughly into the room where his wife had gone. "Sleep off your jag. When you're cold sober, we'll talk, and unless Sid Brooks gives you the licking you've got coming, I'll do it myself."

Jeff closed the bedroom door and tramped into the kitchen. Two lamps burned in wall brackets, a long table was littered with dirty dishes, and a confusion of pots and pans covered another table and the stove. The place looked as if it had never been swept.

Peggy, who had trailed the cowboy, shuddered. "Revolting, isn't it? That horrible woman has been offering me food I couldn't eat and ordering me out of her kitchen so I couldn't fix anything for myself."

Jeff shoved pots and pans aside, lifted the stove lids and made a fire. "Trying to starve you, huh? Supposing, we fix a meal for both of us?"

"Swell," she agreed. Bright head tipped, she appraised him once again as if deeply puzzled.

IN HIS active and always adventurous life he'd never had time for romance, and none of his friends had ever called him handsome or a lady's man. But he could not know that Peggy Galenstock was fairly itching to run her fingers through his heavy mat of crisp black hair, nor that she was thinking, "He's a hard-looking fellow, but there are twinkles of humor in his eyes—clear brown eyes—and already I know I can depend on him."

"Did you know your coat's ripped all down its back?" she said, laughing.

"Coat?" He peeled it off. "Well, I'm not used to wearing one anyhow." He tossed the garment into a corner.

"How did you happen to come here so late at night?" she asked.

Without stopping his work of clearing up part of the mess, Jeff spoke. "It wasn't by chance, Peggy," he said. "Nor am I really a cattle buyer. I've tried my hand at almost every Western occupation—all proved too tame and monotonous for the reckless streak in me."

He paused, and his eyes twinkled at her serious, questioning face. Saucy lips, impertinent little nose and smooth cheeks framed by blonde hair hanging loosely, he reckoned it was by far the loveliest face he'd ever seen.

"Well, I was active in three different range wars, then I was a Stockman's Association detective and got into plenty of scrapes. But just now I'm a free-lance trouble-shooter, and I worked with old Sheriff McAdams before ever he came to this neck of the woods. Recently he sent for me to give him a hand with what he suspects is somethin' crooked being pulled off here on the J G ranch."

"Oh!" cried Peggy. "Now I understand about you. But why didn't McAdams come himself? I asked him to come."

"So he told me, Peggy. But McAdams is on crutches. Due, so he has said in Anderton, to a bullet fired by some careless deer hunter while the sheriff was prowling the hills of this J G outfit's cattle range. McAdams doesn't really believe there was anything accidental about the shot that crippled him."

The girl was entirely still, and as when Jeff had first seen her, her luminous blue eyes were wide and frightened. "The sheriff was scouting the range to try to check on how many cattle the J G actually has?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. Peggy, you're supposed to be a tenderfoot from Ohio. But 'scouting the range' is as Western as I am."

She laughed, the sound tinkling music to his ears. "I thought it would be fun to make Sid Brooks and others believe I was a tenderfoot. Actually, I spent all of my early life on a ranch."

"So-ho? McAdams didn't know that. He said that you were John Galenstock's niece, and that upon old John's recent death you became sole heir to his interest in the J G. Your uncle and Sidney Brooks were equal partners, and John Galenstock's will named Brooks as the executor."

Jeff threw a tablecloth over dirty dishes and pots which he had piled on one end of the long table and waited for Peggy to talk.

"Yes, I'm Uncle John's heir," she said. "But I'm not getting something big and valuable for nothing. My father, now dead, put a lot of money into this outfit, and I helped Uncle John with my earnings. We never got back one cent. Dad died broke. My mother and four children younger than I am are depending solely on me now.

"That," she added grimly, "is why I simply won't be whipsawed out of what is rightfully mine. And I'm sure Sid Brooks is trying to swindle me!"

CHAPTER II

Escape

ABRUPTLY Jeff left the room. He reassured himself that Holcomb and his wife were asleep, then he darted outside and listened for sounds which might betray the return of Dolan and his men. Upon hearing none, he looked for a screened box containing fresh meat and returned to the kitchen with a chunk of beef from which he began to cut slices.

Peggy, meanwhile, had put potatoes on to fry, and the cheerful noise of a small coffee mill, held between her knees, was loud in the kitchen. She rose, poured the ground coffee into a pot.

"What else did McAdams tell you?" she asked.

"I saw your letter to him, Peggy. You had heard from Sid Brooks, and Sid had told you the West was wild and dangerous, the J G no place for a woman. However, there was no need of your coming here. Sid would buy your interest in the outfit's four thousand acres of land and four hundred cattle. But you smelled a rat, Peggy, because you had had a letter from John Galenstock, shortly before his death, saying that the J G was free of debt and was now running—"

"Not four hundred cattle, as Sid stated, but sixteen hundred!" said Peggy. "So I asked McAdams to check up on the number of cattle in the J G brand and I wired Sid that I was coming to Anderton. He met me at the train, brought me out here, declared there were only four hundred cattle, and did his best to convince me I'd be smart to sell to him. Then he went away, presumably to join his roundup crew."

"Roundup crew?" said Jeff with sharp interest. He had his steaks frying and had turned his attention to making biscuits. "Did you see any of these men, Peggy?"

"No. Apparently the crew was and still is rounding up the range lying between this ranch and the mountains. There aren't any cattle, except the milk herd, in the fields as yet."

"Strange?" mused Jeff. "McAdams thought Curt Bronson, the foreman, a square-shooter. Maybe Sid's got rid of him and hired some hand-picked men. We-ell, the sheriff allowed that if I, a stranger, posed as a cattle buyer and hobnobbed with Sid I might get a tally on the cattle without his knowing what I was up to."

Peggy laughed a bit ruefully. "It's no good. Sid will suspect you at once. I've been here four days, Jeff, and I've had one heck of an experience. Tonight's rough party, planned to scare the wits out of me and frighten me into getting out fast, was the worst. I've been half starved and virtually a prisoner. Oh, Sid left a horse for me to ride. But, although I'm a better rider than he suspects, the horse bucked me off. I tried four times. Had to give up."

Jeff slipped his biscuits in the oven and was still, looking at the girl with a quizzical expression. She could talk about her rough experiences calmly, and even smile—as she was now. By jiminy, she was worth fighting for!

A short time later, Peggy was enjoying her first good meal since she had come to the J G. Jeff didn't know what he was eating—his mind was too busy. It hadn't been by chance that those three tough eggs had shown up at the J G this evening. Obviously Sid Brooks had hired them. As soon as they sobered up they'd report to their boss, and they now had personal scores to settle with Jeff Wade!

PROBABLY the same frightening thoughts were in Peggy's mind, for she lifted her tawny head. "A couple of hours have run along," she said tensely. "Those three gunhawks may come back any minute."

"You think you'll be safe, Peggy, if I talk to Holcomb and his wife and tell 'em what they've got to do?"

"No one is going to do me any physical harm. They don't dare. Jeff, what are you going to do?"

"Ride herd on the J G roundup without letting anybody see me."

She put a hand on his arm, looking appealingly at him. "Then take me with you. I hate being here with those horrible Holcombs. Of course, you can make them go to town. Yet I'd feel jittery, all alone here."

Jeff hesitated. He ought not to take her along, yet he could not refuse her, and wouldn't she be as safe with him out in the hills as on this ranch? "Okay, Peggy, I'll fork your bronc. You ride my livery nag. We'll start now under cover of night. Pack up some chuck for us and take a six-shooter for yourself. I'll be saddling the horses."

At sunrise, after having prowled the foothills for the balance of the night

without locating any cattle at all, Jeff and Peggy came upon tracks pointing toward the ranch. Following this sign, they eventually reined in on a bluff overlooking the deep valley wherein lay the J G. Extending for five miles along curving Whitecap River, its meadows were dotted with haystacks, and a small herd of cattle and several horses were in the lower meadow. Due to the curve of the valley that meadow was not visible from the ranch buildings.

"There are the cattle we've been trailing," Peggy cried. "How many, Jeff?"

"Roughly, four hundred. Also twenty to thirty horses." Jeff rode back and forth, scrutinizing the sign where the herd had been put through bars into the meadow. "The dogies were shoved in here two-three days ago," he announced, "and the cowboys who did the work headed back into the hills."

"Which means," said the girl, "those cowboys rejoined Sid's roundup."

"Uh-huh. Let's find that roundup."

They scouted cautiously, neither of them having forgotten the three gunhawks. They could not in one day explore the entire area. But all of the range which they did cover had been grazed, and there was evidence to show that the stock had been gathered. Twice they made stops to rest the horses and to eat the food which Peggy had brought along, and at sundown they found a place where a roundup camp had been made.

"The outfit night-herded a big bunch right here," Jeff said. "And there were a darned sight more than any four hundred cattle! We'll see where they went —if you aren't too worn down?"

"I am weary and saddle-sore," said Peggy. "But I'm eager to—to what? You suppose the cattle have been stolen?"

JEFF was following the trail sign. Hoof marks and wagon tracks led east toward a low saddle in Whitecap Range. "If they were stolen it was with Sid Brooks' consent! I think this is a tricky play to convince you that the J G has only the cattle that are now on the ranch."

Twilight was deepening to full darkness when they came upon two sore-footed old bulls, two lame cows, one with a calf, and three other calves which were bawling plaintively for their mothers.

"The calves got away from the cowboys," Jeff explained. "The cripples were dropped because they couldn't travel. Peggy, airline you're only about six miles from the ranch. Can you make it home, alone?"

"I'm staying with you! Apparently there is a good trail over the mountains by way of the canyon just ahead of us."

"Peggy, if Sid's men know what he's up to, they're going to shoot at anybody trailing 'em."

"That's why we must shove along in the night."

"You won't go back?"

"No!"

They rode on, Jeff more deeply troubled than he had been since the adventure began. He really should turn back and land Peggy safely on the J G and then—

His thoughts stopped. A man with a gun in his right hand had ridden out from behind a huge rock. He was one of Jeff's three antagonists of last night, Flat-Nose Jake. And he was cold sober now.

"Hold your horse with your left hand. Right 'way up!" he snapped at Jeff, and to Peggy added, "If you wiggle a finger, Missy, I'll shoot your pal."

Obviously Jake had ridden down the canyon from the east. This meant that he alone had gone to report to Sid Brooks, while Dolan and Bucktooth had wasted the day hunting for Jeff and the girl.

"Ha!" ejaculated Jake abruptly. "There's Dolan and Bucktooth yonder. Is that a relief! Hold it, you two, till they get here."

Grim urgency for immediate action welled up in Jeff. The black pony he was

riding was a tricky, half-broken mustang. Twice during the day it had come undone, attempting to rid itself of its rider. And now, spur-gouged, it lunged ahead wildly and landed pitching.

Jake's gun roared, the bullet screaming close to Jeff just as he keeled out of his saddle. Twisting like a cat in air, Jeff landed on his feet and, as he had hoped, Jake's mount was whirling and snorting, disconcerting the gunhawk.

Bounding forward, Jeff came against the horse. Jake clubbed at him with his gun, but Jeff grabbed the man's wrist. A twist, a savage jerk, and Jake was wrenched from his saddle. He was also disarmed. Jeff lunged again, and caught the bridle reins of Jake's mount and flung himself up into the saddle.

Meanwhile, Dolan and Bucktooth were zinging forward, and Peggy's docile horse had come to life and was running up into the canyon. Jeff dared not take time to try to catch the black pony, so he wheeled Jake's late mount and forged up alongside Peggy.

"Blister that nag with your quirt," he called.

From behind came shouts and useless shots. Then sounds denoted that Dolan and Bucktooth were taking time to catch the black pony for their pal. After that came the steady drumming racket of pursuit.

Peggy was lagging behind. "This horse can't hold the pace," she cried.

NIGHT had come. In the depths of the canyon it was intensely dark. Jeff held his mount beside the girl's considering what to do. He and Peggy were both armed, but he simply could not and must not let her run the frightful risks of a gun duel. How then could he fight those men?

The canyon had widened and the horses were now brushing past heavy jackpines at their right. Quickly Jeff half-hitched his bridle reins to the saddle horn, and flung himself clear of his saddle to land on the rump of Peggy's mount. "Stop your horse and turn into the brush!" he tensely whispered.

Catching on instantly, she obeyed. Fortunately the horse did not whinny when she halted it, and they both slid off, waiting in tense silence. The three men, hearing the other horse as it sped on up the canyon, flashed past their quarry without pause.

"Close shave, wasn't it?" Peggy said, holding tightly to Jeff's shoulder.

Jeff chuckled. Most girls would have been scared stiff, but Peggy was as cool as if she really enjoyed the danger. Admiration for her built up in him more strongly than ever. Nevertheless he spoke sternly.

"Now, you're to take this horse and go straight to the J G, he said. "Better still, ride to Anderton, find McAdams and have him put you in a safe place."

"Tch!" He could not see her face in the intense darkness, but her fingers bit hard on his shoulder. "I'm not looking for a safe place. What are you going to do?"

"Go over this pass to find out what's what with the J G cattle."

"Count me in, Jeff!"

"Peggy! Don't you realize you've become mighty precious to me and—"

"And you to me, Jeff Wade," she interrupted. "That's why I won't let you risk your neck all alone. It's my job too, Jeff. My family's future's at stake. For if Sid gets away with those cattle— Let's eat and then start on."

IN THE bundle behind Peggy's saddle Jeff found two sandwiches, and at the stream which chuckled down the canyon, he dipped water up in the brim of his hat for them to drink. Before they had finished the skimpy meal, alarming sounds reached their ears.

Riders were coming down the trail from the east.

"They're hunting for us, combing the brush on both sides of the trail," Jeff announced.

"Can't we trick them again?" Peggy said, low and excitedly. "Turn the horse

loose, start it down the trail fast. They'll think we're running away and tear out after it."

Jeff didn't like the plan too well. It would put them both afoot. But it was preferable to being caught. He jerked the bridle from the livery stable horse and slapped it into a gallop.

Again the two waited, crouched among the scrubby trees and peering out at the trail. The horse's hoofs beating off down the canyon made a musical tattoo, and four shadowy figures on horseback, leading one horse, materialized on the trail. Jeff badly wanted that lead horse—the one he had first turned loose. Yet he saw no way of getting it.

"We've made too much racket," one man said. "They've heard us and hiked!"

Peggy's lips came close against Jeff's ear. "Sid Brooks! I know his voice."

Jeff could not distinguish one man from another. But he thought, "If Brooks was alone, I'd grab him and wind up this business pretty quick."

"Maybe they ain't hiked," another of the men snapped. "Bucktooth, you flog after that running horse and catch it. The rest of us'll prowl this brush. Eh, Sid?"

"Okay," said Sid. "From what you birds tell me of this Jeff Wade he must be a bearcat on wheels. And smart to boot."

One man rode on at a lope. Three dismounted on the trail abreast of Jeff's and Peggy's hiding-place. Then one man held the four horses while two, close together, and with guns in hand, began their extremely difficult search of the canyon floor.

CHAPTER III
Missing Cattle

WHILE the men searched for them, Peggy and Jeff had stolen a score of yards up-country. "Peggy," he breathed, "wait here while I get horses. Once I have them, be ready to jump on while they're running, for things are going to get hot."

Silent as a lynx, Jeff came in behind the man holding the animals, and swung the barrel of his gun to the fellow's head. The man had heard him and let out a wild yell. But the blow felled him.

Jeff grabbed a handful of bridle reins, leaped into one saddle, and turned up the canyon, leading the other three horses. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and although figures were very indistinct, he nevertheless saw Peggy waiting for him and ready to grab a saddle horn and swing herself astride a mount. She did it, too!

The man Jeff had hit hadn't been put out. He was shooting as fast as he could pull trigger. Storming out of the pines came the other two, and they opened up as well. One of the four horses faltered and jerked the lead reins from Jeff's hand. The other three swept on around a turn, out of the line of gunfire.

Jeff saw Peggy riding safely beside him. He pulled to a stop, listened with grim enjoyment to chagrined oaths and pithy comments: "Set us plumb afoot."

"This nag? Crippled. May be all right in time—but can't be ridden now."

"Was the girl with that hombre, Jake?"

"Didn't see her. Just a glimpse of him as he hit me."

"Well," Sid Brooks' voice, "Bucktooth's got a horse and he'll sure catch the one that was runnin' away. Then you and me, Dolan, can zing after that cuss. You others get mounts at the ranch and come on fast as you can."

Jeff caught Peggy's hand. "I don't think Bucktooth'll be back for quite a while," he said low, yet exultantly. "That livery horse, going toward its home with no rider to weight it down will give him a tough race. Let's go."

"Let's," agreed the girl. "Boy! Will I have something to tell my family—and my grandchildren, if I have any."

At daybreak they had put the mountain range behind them and, following cattle tracks, they had turned to the right off the main trail and were cutting across foothills. During the long and tiring ride no ominous sound of pursuit had worried them, nor had they met anyone. Now, however, as they topped out on a ridge, Jeff uttered a startled cry.

"Look! The cattle!"

Ahead of them lay a wide valley, dotted with haystacks and alive with cattle. A willow-lined river cut its swath from south to north along the valley—three smaller tributaries flowing down from the mountains met that stream at widely spaced points. At the north end of the ranch, and huddling close against the willows, stood a cluster of ranch buildings. Beyond the valley, foothills melted into a plain extending on into the horizon where the first blush of sunrise had now appeared.

Jeff's sleep-hungry eyes sparked with pleasure. Here lay a ranch almost equal to the J G, and here, at a rough guess, were more than one thousand cattle, not counting calves, cattle he was positive had been trailed from the J G range to this valley.

"You're sure those are J G cattle?" Peggy asked.

"Uh-huh! But to prove it we must get close enough to read the brands. Pull back into the cedars!" turning his mount and Peggy's and the horse he was still leading. "That ranch has come to life. A wrangler's dashing out to bring in the cavvy. A sizable cavvy; and, by gollies, there's a chuck-wagon sitting close to the bunkhouse. Naturally it's the J G roundup chuck-wagon. That means the J G punchers are here."

PEERING out from among the pungent cedars, the tired girl asked, "Leading up to what?"

"Those punchers must be in on Sid's play. So-o, though I'd like awful much to give you a good meal and then get you settled in a comfortable bed in yonder house, it would be silly for us to ride in there."

"I'll be all right as soon as I get only a little sleep. What would you do if you were alone, Jeff?"

Jeff didn't answer at once. His eyes had picked up a lone rider fogging into the ranch from the west. Obviously he had come over the mountain passes and was on the well-defined trail off which Jeff and Peggy had turned a short time ago. It led to the ranch buildings, and as the man pulled up in the yard three other men appeared and surrounded him.

The rider gesticulated toward the very ridge where Jeff and Peggy were stationed, then he dashed to the corrals where a wrangler was closing a gate behind a cavvy. The three men followed him.

"You see that, Peggy?" Jeff asked.

"Yes. At this distance I can't be sure, but that man who just arrived must be Sid Brooks."

"Yep. Evidently he got Bucktooth's horse and came over the pass alone, while his three pets hoofed it to the J G to get mounts. But Sid Brooks is starting a man and woman hunt right now! Come on."

Jeff followed the ridge until he came to one of the creeks, which ran across the ranch meadow to join the main river. Like the river itself there were willows bordering this tributary, and, keeping to the cover of this brush, the two followed the stream. Jeff was obliged to open a hole in the outside fence to let the horses through.

Riding on, he peered at nearby cattle, "J G brand on every critter we can see!" he said.

Four men, all on fresh mounts, had zinged away from the buildings and were now on the ridge. "They can pick up our horses' tracks and follow us," Peggy said tensely. "If only there was somewhere to hide and rest until they stop searching."

Jeff gave her a commiserating glance. Yesterday's sun had been hard on her

creamy complexion. Her hair had come loose and waved raggedly around her face and ears—she was tousled and dusty and worn, and tired. Although it wasn't really his fault, he was out of patience with himself, because she had had such a gruelling ordeal. Now she must have rest.

Suddenly came an idea. He had already noted new stacks of hay built this year in the same stackyards with old ones, and here, conveniently close to the stream, stood an old stack with a new one built up against it. Yet there would be a narrow space between those stacks into which a person could wriggle.

Halting the horses, Jeff lifted Peggy from her saddle, told her briefly what he had in mind for her. "Lie low till after dark t'night," he finished. "Then I'll meet you and have food for you."

"But what about you?" She wasn't too sleepy to show concern for his safety. She was conscious of his nearness—his strength. How much he meant to her. "What will you do?"

"Shucks, I'll play hide and seek with 'em in those dense willows. That'll keep 'em busy and Sid will figure you're with me."

"All right, Jeff."

Tenderness softened the harsh lines of Jeff's face as he watched Peggy scoot to the haystack, crawl through the buck-and-pole fence and then disappear in a tiny opening, invisible from where Jeff stood, between the old and the new stacks.

MOUNTING, he dashed to the veritable jungle of willows. By this time sounds of pursuit were quite audible. He reached the river, abandoned his three horses and made his way through the willows to the ranch buildings.

Here, the only two men present were in the main house eating breakfast. A frowsy and weatherbeaten old codger with squinted eyes and huge brown mustache was obviously the J G roundup cook.

The other fellow, solid, middle-aged, with sandy complexion and big, work-hardened hands, looked to be a ranchman. Probably he owned this ranch, and he either might or might not be on the square.

Jeff was considering barging in on them while he had the opportunity when the alarming sound of hoofs caused him to duck back into the willows. One of the four man-hunters loped into the yard, pulled in at the main house.

"We've found the horses that tough hombre stole, but not the thief," he shouted. "Barney, shoot to kill if you see him. Don't take no chances. Mustache Mel, hook your team to the chuckwagon. Get ready to roll back to the J G right now."

Mustache Mel, the cook, was at the door. "But I was to stay here. What's the yank, Sid?"

"Take some cooked grub with you! And hustle!" snapped Sid.

He drew his six-shooter and rode around the house, then along the edge of the willows toward bunkhouse and barn and corrals, passing within twenty feet of Jeff Wade.

At last Jeff had his chance to size up Sidney Brooks. Middle-aged, blond, aggressive and heavy-set, he sat his horse like a rock, this rock-like quality further emphasized by bulging forehead, out-jutting lower jaw, wrinkle-cornered and habitually half-closed stern gray eyes. A strong and determined man and a leader of men, whom Jeff would rather have had for friend than for enemy.

Raking the brush with his glance, Sid rode on to the bunkhouse which stood close to the willows and between main house and stable. On the far side of it from the house was the J G chuckwagon.

And now, out of the willows rode Sid's three cowboys. They were leading the three horses which Jeff had abandoned, and, to Jeff's consternation, mounted on one of these was Peggy Galenstock! On that far side of the bunkhouse, out of sight of the man at the main house, they reined up.

Jeff quickly shifted ground to where he got an unobstructed view. His teeth clamped together, his hand was on his gun. Curiosity, mingled with caution, held him. Surely those cowboys and Sid would not dare to harm Peggy.

Sid gave a terse order: "Clegg, you keep Barney Ivers in his house," he said. "Put him to making breakfast for you boys."

One cowboy rode on to the main house. Sid's next order ran, "Squint, face the willows, gun cocked and eyes open."

A rider obeyed this command. The third was holding the horse upon which Peggy was mounted. To him Sid said, "Don't let her start anything, Wickers."

Dismounting, Sid lugged a bed-roll out of the bunkhouse, tossed it up into the wagon box, and climbing up into the space between the wagon seat and the chuck box, he spread out the bed. Apparently the high box itself was almost completely empty.

Sid jumped to the ground. "Get in that wagon," he ordered Peggy.

"No," she defied him.

THE old cook had caught his four-horse team and was leading them to the wagon. Abruptly he stopped, gawped bug-eyed at the girl and then stuttered, "Sid, wh-uh-wha-?"

"It's okay, Mel," snapped Sid. "She's Peggy Galenstock. You must take her back to the J G. I'll be right with you on horseback. Peggy, you can sleep all the way. If you do wake up, Mustache Mel'll have some grub for you. I swear that no harm'll come to you. Now don't force me to get rough."

Jeff Wade didn't hear the rest. Although he had heard no sound behind him, something round and hard pressed against his backbone.

"Drop your gun and stand hitched or I'll let daylight plumb through you!" a low voice gritted close to his left ear.

Jeff felt as if an unseen force grabbed his stomach and tied it in a knot. Belatedly, he recalled that the man who had wrangled the cavvy had not joined Sid for the man hunt. Obviously, Sid had posted that fellow in the willows to make just such a play as this! For a sliced second Jeff hesitated, then let his Colt fall.

CHAPTER IV
Honest Rancher

PEGGY had climbed into the wagon box, and the cook was hitching up his team. Sid had thrown a heavy tarpaulin over the wagon, and he was lashing it down securely on both sides of the box. Peggy would not suffer for air, but she would be unable to see anything or to get out of the wagon so long as the tarp remained in place.

The man who had captured Jeff waited until Sid had finished his job before he called, "Here, Sid! Here, Squint!"

Sid leaped as if a wasp had stung him and ran to the nearby willows. Squint bounced out of his saddle and followed. Both men stared hard at Jeff.

"Good work, Alec," Sid said. "I knew you could slip around in the brush quiet as an Apache. Good work. Well, meddler," to Jeff, "I'm getting my first squint at you. And it'll also be my last."

"Your last?" Jeff asked steadily. "Go ahead, ask me a lot of questions."

Sid gave him as cold a look as is possible for one man to give another. "Tie his hands, Alec. Squint, shoot him if he bats an eye. Men, as soon as the wagon gets a quarter-mile or so from this Bar B ranch, fire half a dozen shots. Then I'll tell the girl my men have killed her friend. But don't just shoot this bird. I've told Barney Ivers he's a horse thief. Keep that idea strong in Barney's mind and hang this cuss for a horse thief. Got his hands tied?"

"Yep," said Alec, stepping around so Jeff could see he was a wiry, squirrel-mouthed fellow with a pair of chilly blue eyes. "And we'll sure enough stretch his neck, boss."

"Don't let me down," said Sid Brooks shortly. "Mel's pulling out." He stepped to his horse, mounted, and added, "If by chance I miss seeing Dolan, Jake and Bucktooth, and they should show up here, Alec, you tell 'em I want 'em at the J G ranch tonight, sure."

He loped to join the chuck-wagon which was creaking across open country on the trail to the pass over Whitecap Range.

Squint had stepped out to join Wickers, the cowboy who had held Peggy's horse, and abruptly both fellows fired their six-shooters at the blue sky. Eight reports in all, an explosion of sound which naturally carried to the moving wagon, and it also brought the two men who had been at the main house to the bunkhouse on the run.

With the odds against Jeff thus increased, he took stock of his own desperate situation. He was still at the edge of the dense willows, hands bound behind his back, but guarded only by Alec. The fellow had become careless, his gun was pointed downward.

As swiftly as a weasel, Jeff kicked the man's shin and wheeled away from him, lunging headlong into the willows. Alec screamed with pain. Yet although dancing on one foot, he emptied his Colt, firing wildly into brush. Bullets humming like wasps passed the stampeding cowboy, but none scored a hit.

A few seconds later, a total of five men were hunting for the escaped captive.

JEFF went on for a short distance, making a great racket. Then, stealthy as a fox, he moved toward the house. If only he could get into it while the man-hunters were still in the willows!

He did reach it, went in through a door on the far side of the kitchen where a wood fire burned in the cook stove and the aroma of coffee and sizzling steaks reminded him of his gnawing hunger.

But the thing he needed most of all was lying on a table, a sharp butcher knife. Fumbling and losing precious seconds, Jeff wedged the knife into a crack in one wall and backed up against its blade.

Boots were crunching gravel outside, an ominous sound promising he'd be shot at sight. Ah! The cord had parted. He jerked free his wrists and took along the cord and the knife as he darted silently behind the open main door of the kitchen.

A man tramped in, and Jeff peeked around the door to see the rather stolid ranchman, Barney Ivers. Ivers opened the oven and took out a big pan of brown biscuits. Then he turned the steaks in two skillets and stirred up frying potatoes. He had a cartridge belt buckled around his hips, a Colt hanging loosely in its holster.

Jeff came swiftly in behind the ranchman, plucked the gun from its holster. "Don't yell or I'll have to shoot you, Ivers. Turn around and look me in the eyes."

Ivers was hostile and belligerent rather than frightened. "What you want to know—horse thief?"

"I've got reason to believe you're on the square and don't know what's going on," Jeff replied. "Sid didn't mention the girl to you, and they took pains to keep you from seeing her."

Ivers' squinted and angry eyes snapped wide open. "What girl?"

"Peggy Galenstock. Sid and his cook just now took her back to the J G, a captive. Truth is, she and I were checking up on these J G cattle."

Briefly Jeff explained that Peggy had inherited John Galenstock's interest and that Sid had tried to swindle her on the number of cattle in the J G brand.

"Did you buy this big herd, Ivers?" he demanded, and took a swift survey out of both doors and a window.

Three of the men had now congregated at the corral, where they were making sure that Jeff Wade would be unable to get a horse. They had put all horses which had not been in the corral into it, and were fastening the gate

with a chain, which Jeff reckoned they would padlock. Apparently the fourth man, Clegg, had dashed away to report to Sid.

"Buy this herd? You think I'm a millionaire?" said Ivers. "I own this Bar B ranch, but I'm in debt to my neck. Figured I could sell hay. No dice last year. But this fall, only a few days ago, Sid Brooks flogged in here, bought both my old hay and my new crop, said he'd winter twelve hundred-odd cattle here. He landed here with the herd day before yesterday."

"Thanks," said Jeff. "Shove that steak pan this way so I can grab a hunk. Biscuits, too. Didn't Sid have more of a crew than I've seen?"

"He sure did. Paid off four cowboys, includin' foreman Curt Bronson, as quick as they got here."

"Where'd they go?" Jeff clipped, and bit off a mouthful of beefsteak.

IVERS was scowling as if tremendously puzzled. "White Cliff, I reckon. Nearest town on this side the mountains. Twenty-odd miles."

"Too far for me to get help there," said Jeff grimly. Again he shot a glance to the corral. The men there were still busy. "The four cowboys here now were to stay here?" he asked.

"No. The cook was to stay and give me a hand. The cowboys were to take the wagon and part of the cavvy back to the J G. Sid said the reason he brought them cattle over here was 'cause he got cheap hay. Good business on his part."

"I figure Curt Bronson and his three pards must have thought somethin' was all wrong," Jeff returned earnestly. "I figure they'd help Peggy if they knew Sid was trying to flimflam her. Say, you suppose the four rattlesnakes now here will let you go to White Cliff, to get grub or bank your money? If you got cash for your hay you'd better bank it before they cut your throat to get it."

Watching Ivers' eyes narrow and his lips tighten, Jeff knew he had planted a thought in the ranchman's mind of his own personal danger.

"If you can get to town, tell Curt Bronson and his cowboys what I've told you and tell 'em Peggy Galenstock needs 'em mighty bad on J G."

Jeff grabbed two biscuits and a second piece of steak. The three men were crossing the yard. But they halted as Clegg dashed up to them on a sweating horse.

"I saw Sid," Clegg shouted. "Was he burned up! But he said that horse thief was sure to try to get to the J G, and he'd have the pass guarded so as to stop him. We're to find him and kill him, and—"

The man looked quickly toward the house, and lowered his voice as if he didn't want Ivers to overhear. A moment later, however, he straightened in his saddle.

"I see you've fixed it so that fighting hombre can't get a mount," he said. "Now I'll ride out on the ridge and keep my eyes peeled." He sped away.

Jeff looked meaningly at Ivers. "Plenty snakish, as you can see," he commented. "Give me your cartridge belt."

He waited another half minute to get the belt. Then he scurried out the back door and on to the willows just as Alec, Squint and Wickers entered the kitchen to hear Barney Ivers yell excitedly.

"Too late, boys!" he shouted. "That danged thief was here, stuck me up with the butcher knife, got my belt and gun and flew several minutes ago. I was so scairt I couldn't holler."

Several hours later, Jeff, having succeeded in eluding the vigilance of Clegg, approached the Pass itself, to see, to his chagrined dismay, that the mountains on either side of the one opening were actually rock-palisaded cliffs. Not even a mountain goat could scale those palisades. He must get to the J G, where Sid was surely cooking up some new plot against Peggy. But his one hope was to get through the guarded canyon itself.

Footsore, and so sleepy he could scarcely force his aching muscles to do

his will, he held to all the cover he could find and kept on. Then the glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel, high up among nested rocks to the right of the trail, warned him in time to back out of the trap. He reckoned there was sure to be another guard on the other side of the defile, a third one in the center. Suicide to enter that ambush before darkness came.

TURNING into a heavy thicket of alders beside the small stream, Jeff sat down to rest and think. The soft music of the creek was soothing, and presently, in spite of his will, Jeff Wade stretched out and slept.

He awoke hearing noises. It was almost dark, and the noises were hoofbeats and squeak of saddle leather. Moving quickly to the edge of the alders, he had his look. Four riders had passed his hideout and were going up into the canyon, where a stentorian voice halted them.

"Stop! Who are you?"

"That you, Dolan? It's Clegg and Alec and—"

"Okay!" the challenger cut in gruffly. "I see you plain enough so I'm satisfied. About time you were showin' up. You're to take over here for me and Jake and Bucktooth."

"Yep," agreed one of the four. "Have you gunhawks sighted that horse thief?"

"Nope. He sure ain't got through this gap. Didn't you fellers get him?"

"No dice. Where'll we put our horses?"

"Come up this way a hundred yards or so," was the reply. "I suggest that two of you stay on the canyon floor and the other two get up among the rocks each side of it. Sid wants us at the home ranch muy pronto."

"What for?" Alec's voice demanded.

"Dunno," said Dolan. "And the less you fellers know, the better, I'd say."

Meanwhile, hugging the protection of the dark ground and of each rock and bush, close to the left wall of the canyon, Jeff was moving forward. Quite abruptly, a man slid down that wall, and landed with a thump, scarcely six feet ahead of Jeff. Jeff didn't breathe as the fellow picked himself up and joined the other men and horses, grouped now in a small open area.

"Okay!" Dolan's harsh voice. "This darned job's all yours, fellers. We'll be ridin'."

Hoofs struck rocks as horses moved away, and almost immediately were spurred to a lope. And still Jeff was not behind the four men who were taking over the sentry job. Urgency driving him, he wormed onward, fearful the horses would betray his presence. One man was climbing the rocks at the right, another at the left, both swearing low-voiced as they fumbled their way up those almost straight walls. Jeff sensed rather than saw that the other two were tying the four saddle horses. While they were so occupied, he slipped past so close to the animals that one snorted and kicked at him. The man holding it merely growled, "Spooky, huh?" and went on with his task.

"We'd better move back down the gap a little ways," the other fellow said. "So if bullets get flyin' they won't hit our broncs."

Crouching, hand on gun, and still as a boulder, Jeff waited until he was sure the men were gone. The horses knew he was there, so they were not greatly alarmed when he stepped in among them. Untying one, and holding one hand on its nostrils, he led it slowly up the canyon. When after three or four hundred yards he heard no sounds of alarm, he mounted and for another quarter mile or so held the horse down to a walk before he urged it to a faster pace.

Toward two o'clock that night Jeff reached the J G ranch. Dolan and Bucktooth and Jake were only a short distance ahead of him, and by starlight Jeff saw some man meet them, presumably Sid.

Burning with curiosity and with dread of what might now be in store for Peggy Galenstock, Jeff nevertheless was unable

to get near the men without detection. Sid returned to the house. Dolan and his two men went to the stable, turned loose their horses, and put their saddles on fresh mounts which, Jeff reckoned, Sid Brooks must have had stalled for their use. Then the three rode out on the road to Anderton.

Jeff considered trailing Dolan, Jake and Bucktooth, also reporting to Sheriff McAdams. But he decided his first duty was to ride herd on Peggy. Accordingly, he concealed his mount in the willows where he could get it easily, and then scouted the main house. Thanks to his earlier visit, he knew the plan of the house. Peggy's bedroom window was open at both top and bottom, and Jeff heard the regular breathing of someone asleep.

In the Holcombs' room two persons were asleep, and in still another room it seemed certain that Sid Brooks had now retired.

Jeff went to the bunkhouse. Starlight, filtering through a window and the open door, assured him that only one man was in it—Mustache Mel, the roundup cook. Sid had probably convinced Mel that Jeff was a horse thief, so if Jeff tried to make talk with him, the cook might alarm the whole ranch.

CHAPTER V

Fighting Man

AT DAYBREAK, the ranch came to life, the Holcombs getting up first. Holcomb started a kitchen fire, took a milk pail and shuffled to the corrals. Mrs. Holcomb began making breakfast.

Waiting outside the north wall of the house, Jeff heard Sid go into the kitchen, and immediately afterward Mrs. Holcomb pounded loudly on Peggy's door. "Miss Galenstock! Tel'gram for you just been delivered by messenger from Anderton. Tel'gram."

A minute later Mrs. Holcomb was asking, "Bad news, dearie?"

Jeff had heard Peggy's gasp. Now he heard, "Mother's ill. Not expected to live. Wants me to come at once."

Sid called gently, "Get dressed and I'll take you to town, Peggy. But first I'd like to talk business with you."

"Business?" said Peggy sharply. "Oh, all right."

"I'll be waiting in the living-room," Sid answered, then his voice rolled across the yard. "Holcomb, saddle horses for me and Miss Galenstock."

When Peggy left her room, Jeff raised the lower sash of the window, climbed in, and softly pushed the door opening on the living-room until it remained open a crack.

In the living-room Sid Brooks indicated some papers on his desk and said smoothly, "I'll pay you a liberal cash price for your interest in the J G."

Jeff stole a look. Peggy, tight-lipped, tears in her eyes, was standing with the telegram in her hand.

"I still say your men murdered Jeff Wade!" she cried hotly. "I still say Sheriff McAdams can and will prove it."

"And I repeat," Sid put in decisively, "that the man was a horse thief, caught red-handed with three J G horses. He resisted capture, and my men were forced to shoot in self-defense. I can call witnesses, so the sheriff can't possibly make an issue of it."

"I suppose you're right about that," said Peggy, so low Jeff scarcely heard her words. "I also suppose that if I insist on remaining on here as your partner—" Again her eyes went to the telegram—"after I return from visiting my family, you'll make life a living hell for me? As you have done so far."

Sid's rock-like face remained impassive and unreadable. "I'll admit now that there are sixteen hundred cattle, and believe me, I am not trying to flimflam you. A liberal value for the entire outfit is one hundred and thirty thousand dollars. Agree?"

The girl nodded her tawny head. "Yes. Why, that is more than fair!"

"Okay," clipped Sid. "For your half interest I will pay you sixty-five thousand dollars."

A slight noise from without on the north side of the house caught Jeff's attention. Swiftly he stole a look through the curtained window. Three horsemen had silently congregated there —Dolan, Jake and Bucktooth! Leaving their horses groundhitched, they sneaked around the far corner of the house, passing out of Jeff's sight.

CURIOSITY, excitement and apprehension lifting in him, Jeff returned to his spying on the living-room, where Sid Brooks was saying, "Here is the cash," lifting a small canvas sack from the lower drawer of his desk, "in gold and greenbacks. You will sign the papers transferring your interest in the outfit to me?" His eyes held a glitter. Otherwise he was as calm as if merely dickering for a saddle horse.

The tense girl hesitated. "Well, I suppose," she temporized.

Sid interrupted quickly, "I'll dash to Anderton with you to see that you do arrive safely and get the money in the bank—if you wish—before you catch the train to go to your sick mother. Not that there is any danger at all of your being robbed."

Jeff's tight lips formed the word, "Robbed! Now I see it! Last night Sid planned it with Dolan and his pals to lay for Peggy—and Sid—along the road to town and rob them both—or so it will appear to Peggy—probably leaving them hog-tied. Later, Sid will get Peggy's cash for her interest in J G, less a cut for his hired thieves. The big outfit'll be his. Peggy left holding the sack! But—but Dolan and Jake and Bucktooth are here. Sid doesn't know that!"

With a new urgency driving him, Jeff slid out through the bedroom window, approached the three horses, and cut offside latigo straps on all three saddles; also the bridles until all would break at the least strain.

Swiftly though Jeff worked, something was happening in the living-room before he could get back to his post.

"Get out of here, you three! What—"

The report of a gun cut short Sid's voice. Instantly followed a second report, and the thud of a body striking the floor.

Jeff slid in through the window, moved to the door, and peered around it. Sid was down. Peggy, in a corner, was menaced by Jake's Colt. Dolan had grabbed the sack of money. He and Bucktooth, smoking guns in hand, were backing toward the outer door.

"Let the girl be, Jake. She can't do nothin'," said Dolan. "Girl, maybe you'll never figure this out. But we draw the line on robbing a woman. So you still got your interest in J G. Come on, boys!"

Again Jeff went out through the window. Dolan, Jake and Bucktooth rounded the northwest corner of the house, running toward their horses, J G horses which they intended to steal as well as the cash. They snatched up bridle reins and grabbed saddle horns, when sudden calamity hit them. In a sliced second three saddles were rolling on the ground, three men were down, tangled with the saddles, and three snorting horses were running away.

Another instant and Jeff was close to the three men. "Sit up straight, hands reachin', crooks. Or I'll down you!"

Dolan managed to throw a shot at him. Jeff's answering bullet ripped the man's forearm wide open and Dolan's weapon dropped. Jake and Bucktooth had lost their guns in the wild spill they had taken. Now the three sat on the ground, one with his foot still tangled in a stirrup, with their arms lifted.

"Peggy!" Jeff yelled. "Get a lot of stout cord and come help me."

Peggy ran around the corner of the house, Sid's Colt in her hand, but no cord or rope. To Jeff she seemed all eyes in a white face.

"I'm real," he reassured her. "No ghost. See what those Holcombs and Mel are doing."

The blonde girl let her breath go. "Throw me your jackknife," she said.

Jeff tossed her the knife. She put down the gun, and from the saddles snipped long whang leather strings. With these she tied Jake and Bucktooth's wrists together. "Do I tie Dolan's too, even when his right arm's wounded?"

"Yes," clipped Jeff.

Mrs. Holcomb waddled around the corner of the house, her face the color of raw dough. "Mister Wade," she gulped. "Sid's dyin' and he wants to see you and Peggy afore he goes."

"Where's Holcomb?" he retorted. "And Mel?"

"I dunno," she answered.

JUST then the grizzled old cook appeared. "These three rattlesnakes tied me in the bunkhouse," he shouted. "Gagged me, too. I got myself loose. Well, blister my corns! They didn't get away with Sid's wad they bragged they was goin' to get. Who're you?" to Jeff.

"He's Jeff Wade, Mel," Peggy cried. "And he's all right, just like I know you're all right. You ride herd on these thieves while we see Sid."

"Danged tootin'!" said Mel, and picked up the Colt Peggy had dropped. "Just wrinkle your noses, buzzards, if you want to get leaded!"

Mrs. Holcomb had placed a pillow under Sid's head and had tried ineffectually to stop the flow of blood from two chest wounds.

"I'm all through, dying," he said bitterly to Jeff, "so I want to do what I can to square— Peggy, get me those papers. I'll—I'll sign my interest in J G over to you for the same price I'd have paid you."

Jeff helped the man to sign his name. "Who's to get your money, Sid?"

"My will's in desk," panted Sid. "You see relatives do get what I leave, Jeff, huh? The cash I was going to pay Peggy—and what a fool I was to let Dolan know I had it!—not mine really."

"Whose is it?" Jeff asked eagerly.

Sid grimaced, coughed, and spoke in a low voice, "All these years I've held out on old John. I kept the books and flim-flammed him. Held out and hid big and little hunks of cash. More than half that sixty-five thousand really belongs to Peggy now, of course."

"Hold on another minute, Sid," Jeff entreated. "Tell me who shot Sheriff McAdams?"

"McAdams?" The man rallied and blinked his eyes. "I suspected why he was snooping on J G range, got Dolan to bullet-cripple him. Getting—all—dark."

Jeff stood up. "Sid's gone, Peggy, Mrs. Holcomb."

To his astonishment, when the two women were so unlike and had been enemies, they were now holding fast to each other.

"Forgive me if you can, dearie," the older woman was saying. "That tel'gram was faked. Your ma ain't sick."

Turning out of the room, Jeff ran to the stable, where he found Holcomb gagged and lashed to a manger. Releasing the fellow, Jeff glared at him.

"I reckon the only part you and your wife had in all this deal was to frighten Peggy and make things nasty for her?" he said.

"That's all, so help me," gulped Holcomb.

"Okay. You won't get the beating I promised you after all. Now give me and Mel a hand to tie three crooks to separate corral posts."

This job had scarcely been finished when Jeff saw four riders approaching the ranch at a fast lope from the direction of Whitecap Range.

"Those snakish punchers who were helpin' Sid to whipsaw Peggy," he said. "They'll raise hob with us."

Old Mel let out an exultant whoop. "Nope! Them ain't the snakes as was on the Bar B ranch, Jeff. Them's Curt Bronson and three other punchers Sid fired!"

The four thundered into the yard and pulled up.

"Hi, Mel," a lanky old hand said.

"That feller with you Jeff Wade?"

"Yep! Jeff, this is Curt Bronson and—"

"Thanks to what Jeff told Barney Ivers, who looked us up in White Cliff, we're here," Bronson interrupted. "Ivers warned us there'd be gunmen guarding the pass. But I knew of a trail up over the rimrock and down a side canyon into that pass. We took it, come on them fellers from the rear, surprised 'em, and—Well, none of 'em'll ever trouble anybody again. How's things shaping up here?"

"Just fine, now that you're here!" said Jeff. "Mel, tell Bronson what's happened and what's yet to be done."

He ran to the house. Peggy alone in the kitchen, had just washed her face, and was running a comb through her tawny hair as Jeff burst in on her.

"Jeff," she came close to him, "is the fighting and the danger all over?" There was tenderness in the look she gave him, and love and infinite trust.

"Yes, trail partner." He lost himself in her blue eyes. "The dearest trail partner a fellow ever had."

"And now the adventure's over, what'll you do, Jeff?" Her head was tipped back, a provocative smile on her lips.

"Kiss you," answered Jeff. "Then, I'm going in debt to raise money to buy in with you on the J G—if you're willing?"

"Jeff," breathlessly, "after what we've been through together, why ask if I'd be willing? Now—"

The rest was smothered. She was in his arms, and his head bent down to meet hers in a kiss that bore the promise of many happy days they would share together.

Cowboy's Plight

I'm handy with guns and I'm ready to fight,
It's a code of courage I serve—
There's no coyote ahowl, or bandit aprowl,
That can get me to lose my nerve!

I'll face heavy odds and stand up like a man,
Nobody can label me yeller—
But a rangeland girl has my head in a whirl,
And golly, I'm scared to tell her!

—Tex Mumford

Trust YOUR DREAM

A high-voltage romance gets a powerful lot of help from a busybody's chatter!

by Marie de Nervaud

MISS HANNAH SPEEDWELL was the range gossip and then some. Everyone knew it, everyone more or less discounted what she said, but everyone was also wary about attracting the attention of those bright, curious, brown hawk's eyes of hers.

That was why Jerry and Mary Lou both plunged into the brush, ducking away from the headlights of Miss Hannah's car as it came careening down the canyon road. Even in the dark, there was no mistaking that old relic. How Miss Hannah continued to go on living when she drove it the way she did was one of the mysteries of the range. But that mystery wasn't bothering Jerry or Mary Lou any right then.

"Do you suppose she saw us?" Mary Lou clutched Jerry's arm as the tail light wobbled around a curve. "Oh dear!

That sagebrush has just ruined my stockings. And my flounce is—"

"Better ruin your stockings and your flounce than your reputation," Jerry said as he helped her out of the offending sagebrush and back onto the road. "Boy, that was a narrow escape. It sure would be something for Miss Hannah to see Pike Kellogg's girl out walking on the canyon road with Jerry Bailey." He broke into a high falsetto, "And close to midnight, my dear! Coming *down* from the ridge! What they'd been doing up there I'm *sure* I don't know."

Mary Lou had to laugh at his perfect imitation of Miss Hannah's voice, then her mind flashed back and caught on to two words that made her stamp her foot.

"I'm not Pike Kellogg's girl, and you know it."

It was too dark to see the color of the curls that reached about to Jerry's shoulder, but nobody could have had any doubt about that being a red-headed temper. Jerry certainly had no doubt, having encountered, not to say roused, said temper off and on for the last fifteen years. From about the age of seven, to be exact. Quite clearly in his mind's eye, he could see the color scheme of the tense little figure etched in the dim starlight against the somber background of pines.

He could see the glint of the red curls, the sparkle of the yellow-brown eyes, the freckles on the up-turned nose and the firm little chin, with its provocative tilt. He could also imagine the nile green of the dress with its billowy flounces, though in the dark it was a nondescript light blur, drooping off shapely shoulders.

"Pike doesn't know it," Jerry came back to the case in point. "And your dad doesn't know it. As far as I can see, everyone thinks you're Pike's girl. You've led the whole range on to think so."

"I have not led anyone on to think anything!" The temper was off to a fresh start. "Here I leave the dance and come off with you where we can have a quiet talk, and I tell you just how things are—haven't you been listening to me, Jerry Bailey?"

"I've been listening all right." Jerry's voice was grim. "While I've been away doing my turn in the army, things have been happening. Pike Kellogg has got thicker than thieves with you and your dad. They're going in for this irrigation scheme together on the north range, and it's my bet Pike's supplying most of the capital, if not all."

"He is not!" Mary Lou interrupted. "He's puting in more than Dad is, but Dad's got more experience to put in than Pike has. That makes it fifty-fifty."

JERRY snorted. "Fifty-fifty, yah! If Pike pulled out, the whole thing would flop. But Pike isn't going to pull out. Not with Mary Lou there telling him what a big-hearted friend of the family he is. Friend, my eye!"

"Well, he has been a good friend," Mary Lou defended. "If things can just go along as they're going for another six months or so, until that thing gets really going, everything'll sort of smooth out. Pike doesn't really want to marry me—I mean, it would really be a mistake for him to—he's so much older and everything—"

"Suffering snakes!" Jerry beat his hand against his head. "Women! Everything they do is right! Here you'll play the poor fish along for another six months, and then throw him over—all nobly for his own good."

"If that's the way you feel—" Mary Lou's voice, usually so warm and husky, was suddenly as cold and hard as an icicle—"why don't you just run along and forget all about me?"

"Nothing I'd like better," Jerry groaned. "But I don't seem to be made that way. Good old Dog Tray, that's me. Here I come back, after being away a year—"

"You didn't hurt yourself any, writing letters that year," Mary Lou re-

minded him.

"You know I'm not the writing kind," Jerry protested. "I did write some. But look, Mary Lou! If the new power line goes up through my valley, I'll get paid for the right of way, and we'd be able to get married right off. I've got quite a bit saved up and I could borrow on my insurance. I could go in with your dad in this irrigation thing, if Pike walks out on him. Not in such a big way, of course, but enough to—Oh, Mary Lou, you know—Confound it! There's another car coming!"

Jerry's proposal came to an abrupt stop. The next instant, the jangle and wheeze of the approaching car identified it all too clearly as Miss Hannah's. While the glow of the headlight was still around the curve, the two of them dived for the protection of the brush.

"What's she up to, charging up and down this road?" Jerry muttered wrathfully.

The next minute, as the car came to a stop not fifteen feet from them, they both got the answer.

"It was right here, Sheriff," Miss Hannah's shrill voice rang out over the dying sputter of the engine. "I was coming down from poor Millie Adams', where I'd been setting with her for a spell, and as I came right about here, two mighty suspicious looking characters jumped off the side of the road into the brush. The more I thought of it as I drove into town the more I felt something ought to be done about it. Then, when I spotted you coming out of the dance hall, I knew it was a sign for me to act and act quick. If anyone broke into Millie's house, they'd scare her into a stroke, sure as anything. She—"

The sheriff cleared his throat as she stopped for breath. "Now, Miss Hannah," he soothed, "Like I said before, when you practically shanghaied me, I know you're following what you feel to be your duty, but if there was two guys here, they'd be gone—"

"What do you mean, 'if there was'?" Miss Hannah snapped. "I told you I saw them. They ducked out of the glare of my headlights, but I distinctly saw them. If you're afraid to investigate—I've got my dash light here—"

"Straighten up," Jerry whispered to Mary Lou, as she tried to scrunch behind a sage bush that couldn't possibly hide her in the glare of a light. "We've got to take this head on!" He jerked her to her feet, just as the sheriff said, "Hell!" and pointed a light at them.

"What's all the shooting about?" Jerry took a bold initiative.

Miss Hannah gasped, sucking in her breath with shocked gusto and delight. "Why are you two skulking in the bushes?" she demanded.

"Because you're such a—a—such a gossip," Jerry was mad enough by now to throw all caution to the winds. "What you after, Sheriff? Going to run us in for taking a walk?"

The sheriff said, "Hell!" again, and snapped off the light. Then, in a voice, choking with what might have been laughter or rage, he ordered, "You drive on a piece until you can turn round, Miss Hannah, and get to town."

"Now you've done it," Mary Lou groaned, as they started to walk down the road. "What Miss Hannah won't say now."

"I'll have a few things to say myself." Jerry kicked at a loose rock and sent it crashing into the trees. "I'm fed up with Pike Kellogg. I hear he's trying to get the power line to go up through his place. Well, I'm fighting him for that, and I'm fighting him for my girl. To the devil with Miss Hannah! Let her talk!"

He had to shout the last part above the rattle of Miss Hannah's car, which had now turned around and was heading for town. As the headlights picked them up, Jerry deliberately took Mary Lou in his arms and kissed her.

"Now the fat's in the fire!" He snatched another kiss before he gave in to her struggles and let her go. The car passed, and darkness came once more.

"We'll go back and find Pike and tell him I'm taking you home." Jerry released Mary Lou and straightened up, dizzy with exaltation. He reached out a hand, but it met empty space. Mary Lou was no longer there. She was streaking down the road. Jerry started after her, but kept at a safe distance, instinct telling him that this was no time to buck Mary Lou's temper.

IT WAS Wednesday after the dance, and the fat was in the fire, all right. Mary Lou sat on the rail of the ranchhouse porch after breakfast, disconsolately contemplating the blaze the fat was making.

She'd managed to get back to the dance and find Pike before Miss Hannah could get in any of her dirty work, but Pike was plenty mad without that. It had taken all Mary Lou's skill to get him back onto the dance floor before Jerry came ambling up. But her explanation to Pike of her absence hadn't gone down any too well.

"You keep away from that fresh guy," Pike had said, his florid face redder than usual and his blue eyes taking on a mean squint. "He needn't come back here and think he owns the range. He'll find there've been quite a few changes since he left, huh, honey?"

Mary Lou could still feel Pike's sudden tight squeeze and see the flash that came into his eyes. She hadn't liked it then, and she didn't like remembering it now. Especially after seeing him again last night. He'd been having an ear full of Miss Hannah's gossip, and she'd never seen him in such an ugly mood.

"You'd better watch your step, young lady," Pike had ended up, after quoting some of Miss Hannah's juicier bits. "I'm not taking any girl to a dance to have her sneak off and kiss another fellow."

"You'd better watch *your* step!' Mary Lou could remember saying, though she'd been so mad it was about all she did remember of what she'd said, until she'd ended with, "I couldn't help his kissing me! I had no idea—"

"If I'd known you were so helpless," Pike had broken in, "I'd have had my share before this." He'd grabbed her and kissed her again and again, in a way that made Mary Lou burn all over at the thought of it.

She'd finally fought her way clear, and she hadn't had to pretend to be mad, the way she'd done with Jerry. She was mad clean through, but she was scared, too. There'd been a look in those blue eyes of Pike's that had frozen the words on her lips. She'd run into the house and slammed the door, then made a dive for her bedroom.

Pike made no effort to get her to come out again. Instead, Mary Lou heard him call to her father down at the corral. Then, he'd gone down the steps, and that was the last she'd heard until his car had started up about an hour later.

But she'd heard plenty at breakfast. Her father had said that Pike had had a talk with him about putting up more money for the irrigation project right now.

"It seems Pike's kind of hard pressed for cash," he'd ended. "I'd sure hate to lose the chance of getting more land up there in shape for raising all the feed we're going to need."

As though he were still before her, Mary Lou could see the anxious look her father had given her as he'd asked, "Did you and Pike have a falling out, kid? You—you mustn't get touchy if a man loses his head a bit, when he's in love with a girl like you, honey. I kind of thought you liked Pike."

"I—I have liked him," Mary Lou said slowly, "only—"

"He had a notion there might be something between you and Jerry," her father had gone on. "I told him that was only a boy and girl affair. That's right, isn't it?"

"Of course, Dad!" Mary Lou's answer had been so quick and defensive, that she hadn't realized she'd said it, until it was out. Then, she knew it for the lie

it was. But she couldn't go back on it. Not while she was watching the happy relief flooding her father's face.

"I'm mighty glad I was right," he'd said. "Pike's going to be a big man on this range, Mary Lou. When the power line goes through his valley."

"But that's not settled yet."

"Practically. It'll probably be announced tomorrow." Her father had pushed back his chair and gone off with a hopeful, "You'll make it up with Pike, won't you honey?"

Luckily, he hadn't waited for an answer, but suddenly, sitting there in the morning sun, Mary Lou knew the answer. Jerry was right about it's being sneaky and underhand for her to placate Pike. In her heart, she'd known all along that she loved Jerry. The only square thing was to tell Pike frankly how she felt. And there was no time like the present.

As Mary Lou topped the first ridge on the way over to Pike's ranch, she pulled up to give her horse a breathing spell. Just below her, in the wide-spread view of the range, was the speck of a ranch house that was Miss Hannah's. Over the next ridge was Jerry's spread, and beyond that, Pike Kellogg's.

Mary Lou's troubled thoughts shifted to the power line. For years, there'd been talk of an extension that would run through Jerry's valley, and while Jerry's father was still alive, it had been on the point of going through. Then the war had come along to delay it; and now, in the last year, it had come up again. Everyone had taken it for granted that it would go through Jerry's ranch. What slick, underhand work had Pike been up to?

Following a sudden impulse, Mary Lou headed down for Miss Hannah's. It was important to stop her gossip and keep Pike from getting any more riled up.

"I'm not afraid of her," Mary Lou thought.

Jerry hadn't been. He'd lit right into her, but he hadn't followed through and made her see the real harm she could do. Miss Hannah really had a decent streak in her. That love of gossip was a sort of power complex. Just because everyone was afraid of her tongue and kowtowed to her, she thought she could get away with anything. Well, Mary Lou told herself, she'd show Miss Hannah she couldn't.

AS MARY LOU rode up, Miss Hannah came out the kitchen door, and Mary Lou opened up with both barrels. Miss Hannah's face was a study while she listened to the consequences of her gossiping.

"I'm giving it to you straight," Mary Lou ended. "Because of you, Dad stands a good chance to lose a lot of money as well of one of his pet projects for the ranch."

"Why don't you marry Pike and be done with it?" Miss Hannah snapped.

"Because I'm in love with Jerry," Mary Lou snapped back. "I suppose you'll spread that news all over the range?"

Miss Hannah pursed her lips in her wrinkled face and her brown eyes flicked with sudden amusement. "Spunky piece, ain't you?" She gave a short bark of a laugh. "Well, I like spunk. You and Jerry have both got the gumption to tell me to my face what you think of me. That's more'n most folks have. Okay, I'll be careful. What's more, I hope Jerry persuades the power company to give him the right of way, when he sees their chief engineer today."

"Sees—sees who today?" Mary Lou gasped.

Miss Hannah gave her dry chuckle. "Too bad you don't listen in on party lines. You might learn a thing or two. Only, you're not on Jerry's and Pike's line. But I am, and I listened in yesterday to the telegraph operator readin' 'em both the same telegram. They were signed Ralph Taylor, Chief Engineer, M. and W. Power Company. They said he and a surveyor would be calling on

Jerry and Pike today to make their final decision."

"What time was this?" Mary Lou asked.

"Around noon."

"It couldn't have been. I ran into Jerry on the upper range just before noon, and he was heading up for the box canyons. He wouldn't have gotten home before sunset."

Miss Hannah's shrewd eyes looked startled. "Say, that's queer. Someone answered and said he was Jerry Bailey. Come to think of it, his voice wasn't just like Jerry's—"

"Was this after Pike had had his message?"

"Yes. They called Pike first. Then, they rang two bells, and a man answered and said he was Jerry Bailey. After the operator had given him the message, he said 'Thank you,' and hung up."

"It wasn't Jerry!" Mary Lou was off her horse, running past Miss Hannah into the kitchen, where she made for the telephone on the far wall. She gave Jerry's number, then hung up and waited while the bell rang two, over and over.

"That line seems to be out of order," the operator finally reported, and Mary Lou turned to Miss Hannah with desperate anxiety.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed. "Pike's doublecrossed Jerry on this. He took the message and pretended to be Jerry. Then, I bet he cut the wires to Jerry's place, and he's gotten him away from his ranch on some pretext or other—Oh, Miss Hannah, I just know it! I've got to find Jerry and get him home so he can see those men."

Before Miss Hannah had a chance to answer, Mary Lou was out of the kitchen and in the saddle. "If Jerry should show up, tell him to go home," she called as she whirled her pony and made for the ridge that divided the two ranches.

So that was what Pike had meant by saying that it had practically been settled in his favor. He'd known Jerry wouldn't show up, and it would go to him, Pike, by default.

"It won't! It won't!" Mary Lou whispered.

Only, how could she help it? How could she find Jerry in that vast expanse of mesa?

As she neared the top of the ridge, a flash of memory brought sudden hope. From this vantage point a smoke signal could be seen for miles. Not since they were kids had she and Jerry used smoke signals, but at one period of their lives they had played a large part. Many a time had Mary Lou summoned Jerry with the accepted signal, "Come over to my place." Or, if she happened to go over to Jerry's and he wasn't there, a "Come on home" signal would bring him racing back.

Mary Lou dismounted, threw her horse's reins over his head, and started to gather brush and dry twigs. In no time, the old "Come on home" signal rose toward the clear blue sky.

After giving as much time as she dared to signaling, Mary Lou headed full speed for Jerry's ranch. If only those men had gone to Pike's first, so she'd be in time to meet them when they came to Jerry's, and hold them until he came back!

But she wasn't in time. With a sinking heart Mary Lou knew it the minute she saw the note stuck under Jerry's door. She pulled it out and read it. "Sorry to miss you, but you evidently aren't interested in the proposition. Will close deal with Pike Kellogg."

Pausing only long enough to grab a pencil from her pocket and write on the note, "Come to Pike's! He's tricked you and has the M. and W. chief engineer over there," Mary Lou was once more in the saddle, racing for the Kellogg ranch.

Pike's expression as she rode up to the three men sitting on the porch told Mary Lou all she wanted to know. Mixed with Pike's angry surprise was a narrow-eyed wariness and a menacing threat. Mary Lou stepped off her lath-

ered horse and came up to the three men.

"You can't do this to Jerry, Pike!" Small and straight, her red hair gleaming in the sun, she met his eyes then turned to the other two. "Jerry never got your message," she said. "He *is* interested in your proposition, Mr. Taylor. Nothing would have kept him away if—"

"You keep out of this, Mary Lou," Pike began, but the older of the other two men interrupted.

"I'd like to hear what this young lady has to say, Mr. Kellogg." He looked at Mary Lou. "What makes you think Jerry Bailey didn't get the message? I checked with the operator who said she read the telegram to him personally."

"She thought she did, because someone answered the telephone and said he was Jerry. There is only one person who would have a motive for doing that." Mary Lou took a deep breath. "Pike and Jerry are on the same party line. So is Miss Hannah Speedwell."

DISREGARDING the oath Pike ripped out, she poured out her story and the reasons for her suspicions. "Jerry couldn't have been there when that message was telephoned out, you see. I'm sure Pike got Jerry away from home today with some cock and bull story. I bet he cut Jerry's telephone line, too. It's only fair for you to wait and see Jerry." Her glance suddenly took in a card table with legal looking papers spread out on it, and the red-headed temper exploded through her pleading. "You can't sign until you've seen Jerry!"

Before any of the three realized what she was up to, Mary Lou had darted over to the table and swept the papers up in her two hands. Holding them tightly against her, she backed against the wall, avoiding the clutch Pike made for her.

"Wait! I'll handle this, Mr. Kellogg." Mr. Taylor forestalled Pike's second attempt to grab the papers. "I've decided to see Jerry Bailey. Until I do, I'll keep an open mind. As far as physical problems are concerned," he went on, "it's about six of one and half a dozen of the other which of your ranches we carry the line through. But the integrity of the man who owns the ranch we choose is of the utmost importance to us. It's worth waiting a few hours—"

"Here's Jerry now!" Mary Lou's cry interrupted him as a horseman came down through the trees by the ridge, making for them at a leisurely pace.

"Say, Pike," he called as he rode up, "who told you those fences of mine on the north range were down? They're tight as a drum. You had me scared stiff when you came over this morning and—"

"Jerry!" Mary Lou stepped away from the wall. "Did you get the note I left at your place?"

Jerry stiffened as he saw her and gave a quick look at Pike. Then he dismounted, shaking his head. "I haven't been home yet. I—"

"Didn't you see my smoke signals?"

Jerry stared at her. "Smoke signals? Are you loco, Mary Lou?" He glanced questioningly at the two men. "What's all—"

Mr. Taylor broke in on his bewilderment. "Mr. Bailey, was a telegram from the M. and W. Power Company telephoned out to you yesterday?"

"Nope." Excitement gleamed in Jerry's eyes as he looked from one to the other of the strangers. "Say, are you from the power company? The reason I didn't get your telegram is because my line's out of order. I discovered it just before I started off this morning."

"Maybe that's the reason, maybe not." Mr. Taylor reached out his hand to Mary Lou for the papers. "Suppose we all go back to your place, Mr. Bailey, and have a talk?"

Pike started to protest, but at the look Mr. Taylor gave him, he turned abruptly and went into the house, slamming the door behind him.

Mr. Taylor carefully folded the papers

(Concluded on page 125)

ROMANCE Rides the Rodeo

by FOGHORN CLANCY

FAMOUS RANCH AND RODEO EXPERT

A True Champion Proves Her Pluck!

SOMETIMES it takes more than just natural skill or ability to win. Sometimes it takes brains, quick wits, the knack of seizing upon a lucky break and using it, or of turning what looks like a tough break into an advantage. And that last is perhaps, the most admirable faculty of all—the mark of the true champion.

This was the sort of thing that happened to Mildred Douglas.

Mildred was kind of a cowgirl sensation around the year 1918. She had come up in the game like a rocket, leaving a trail of broken records behind her. She had won the cowgirl's bronc riding contest in some big shows, including several the season before at Garden City, Kansas; Weiser, Idaho and a number of other Western rodeos.

A Feather in Her Cap

Then she had finished out the season by winning at the very important Great Pendleton, Oregon, Roundup. This was a real feather in her cap because to win there she had to eliminate and outride one of the greatest fields of girl bronc riders ever assembled in the West.

With all that, Mildred was young and just beginning and though she had beaten some very tough competition, she still had to prove herself to a large portion of the rodeo public.

Under these circumstances she came to Tucumcari, New Mexico, in August, 1918, for the Annual Roundup.

The local committee had engaged Tex Austin, one of the best known rodeo producers and directors of that day, to direct the show and manage the arena. The rodeo had been lavishly advertised throughout the state and far beyond and of course knowledge of it ran all through the rodeo circuits.

The result was that thousands of visitors came to see it and also one of the largest numbers of top-flight contestants signed in to try their luck. Big cash prizes helped swell the roll of eager cowboys and cowgirls who were anxious to take home a chunk of money.

Famous Riders

Among the best cowboy riders there were such nationally known figures as Leonard Stroud, Hugh Strickland, Angelo Hughes, Booger Red Jr., and dozens of others who were in the very top rank of competition and who were certain to carry off the first group of prizes—or make it very tough for anyone else who had ambitions that way.

Among the feminine contingent of riders were such daredevils as Mayme Stroud, Maud Tarr, Fox Hastings and

The Home Folks at Tucumcari Were Rooting for

Mildred threw both arms up in the air as though deliberately tossing the rein away

last but not least, Ruby Dickey.

Ruby is important to our story because she was a local girl who was heavily favored by the home folks. This favoritism was not only because they knew her and because she was defending the home team reputation, so to speak. Ruby was good. In fact she was so good that she was much more than the local pride and joy. She had won the girls' bronc riding contest at many other rodeos and was considered a first rate threat in any competition.

She had come back home to engage in this contest because it was first rate stuff and it was only incidentally that she had the support and blessing of the citizens of Tucumcari behind her.

Lady Rodeo Rivals

Somehow Mildred Douglas knew it was Ruby Dickey she would have to beat!

Mildred had already enjoyed a very successful season that year. She had displayed wonderful form and piled up an imposing string of victories, including winning the finals at Garden City, Kansas for the second time.

She had come to Tucumcari direct

from the Great Cheyenne Frontier Days at Cheyenne, Wyoming, where again she had outridden a big and dangerous field of some of the West's best girl bronc riders.

Mildred had won the championship at Cheyenne and in addition to a sizable cash prize, had received a beautiful trophy—a silver mounted, hand-stamped saddle. She was understandably proud of this saddle and rode it in the grand entry parade at Tucumcari. She made a striking picture, being a very pretty girl and superbly mounted with the gorgeously ornate silver saddle, riding with the ease of the born horsewoman, she excited much admiring talk from the audience.

With all that, and in spite of Mildred's growing reputation, her good looks and striking carriage, the home folks brushed her off.

"Ruby'll win," they said. "You'll see. Nobody can beat Ruby. That Mildred Douglas may be good, but when you see them both in action and can compare them, you'll see Ruby beat her."

A Dangerous Opponent

Mildred would have been the first to admit that Ruby was a dangerous opponent. She was a strongly built, husky girl, tanned to a rich golden brunette from years in the open. She had spent her entire life, almost, on the ranch near Tucumcari, which was her home.

She had ridden almost as soon as she was out of the cradle and like a true cowgirl, was more at home in the saddle than on foot. There was almost nothing she could not do on a horse.

In addition, she was strong, fast in reflexes, had daring and courage, had confidence in herself and was not afraid of any horse alive, no matter how big and strong and rough and wild he might be.

She had the combination of mental and physical faculties which stamped her a champion in her own right and which made the home folks, who had followed her career, feel she was unbeatable.

True she hadn't yet competed in the really big rodeos, but they felt that was merely a matter of circumstance which would be remedied shortly. And their money was down on Ruby Dickey to beat Mildred Douglas!

As it turned out they weren't far from wrong. The contest pretty quickly simmered down to a duel between these two girls as they both pulled far ahead of the rest of the field. The first two days of the contest they eliminated the rest of their rivals and it was nip and tuck between the two of them. On the last day it was the finals and the championship of the show, with the two girls neck and neck in points.

High Tension

Tension was high that last day. The home town folks were still whooping it up for Ruby. They conceded that Mildred had made a fine showing but they were sure she was due to be eliminated now. Mildred was saying nothing.

Ruby rode first in the finals. She drew a rough bucking bronc named "Grey Wolf"—a savage beast who put up a tough fight and gave her the opportunity to show her skill at its best. Grey Wolf had the reputation of either tossing his riders pronto, or carrying them into first place if they stayed with him because the judges recognized that he was a very tough animal to ride. Ruby put on a beautiful show and rode him to a finish.

The home folks sat back and relaxed. "It's all over now," they gloated.

They had reason. Mildred had drawn a horse named "Scorpion". And Scorpion wasn't in the same class with Grey Wolf as a showy bucker. Even granted that Mildred was good, she wouldn't be able to put on as good a performance because Scorpion could never outbuck Grey Wolf.

Mildred went out on Scorpion, a horse that was quite a head fighter. The seconds ticked by as Scorpion bucked and plunged, with Mildred riding him easily and making a beautiful ride. Nine furious plunges and about seven seconds had ticked by. Then suddenly,

Scorpion ducked his head and flung it far to one side, pulling the rein completely out of Mildred's hand!

Quick Thinking

She realized in a flash, that she could be disqualified for that and lose the ride. It was the toughest kind of a break, added to the other handicap. It was the kind of a break which would have surely defeated any ordinary contestant. But Mildred was no ordinary contestant. And right there she displayed the quick thinking—the adaptation to circumstances, which made her a true champion.

Instead of giving up and losing the ride, she capitalized upon it and turned it to her advantage. She threw both arms up in the air in an extravagant gesture as though she had deliberately tossed the rein away and continued to ride without hands!

Mildred Douglas knew, as all bronc riders did, that one of the hardest things in the world to do is to stay aboard a bucking horse without the control over his head which a rein gives. The horse is free to pull any kind of devilment. Yet it was her one chance and she took it unhesitatingly. She rode with hands up in the air for the remaining five jumps, to the thunderous applause of thousands of delighted spectators.

A True Champion

It was such a spectacular thing to do that everyone knew she was the winner even before the judges made the announcement.

"That was the nerviest thing I ever saw," one of the judges said excitedly. "She deliberately threw that rein away, just to prove what a great rider she was!"

Mildred Douglas knew there was nothing deliberate about it at all. But right then she couldn't have convinced a soul in that arena of the fact. She accepted the championship modestly.

And what the judges didn't know was that she deserved it even more than they realized. For her quick thinking and her ability to turn certain defeat into victory was what stamped Mildred Douglas as a true champion!

All the romance and glory of the rodeo arena in fascinating fiction—featuring SPIRIT OF THE WEST, a stirring novel by Clinton Dangerfield, RODEO PRINCESS, an exciting novelet by Frank Richardson Pierce, and many other glamorous stories—in the big Fall Issue of our companion magazine!

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A Novelet by
JOHNSTON McCULLEY

MADCAP of the BROKEN WHEEL

CHAPTER I

Saved from the Rope

WHEN she heard the sudden tumult, Molly Murphy was loping her pony easily across country to reach the Battle Valley trail and return to the Broken Wheel ranchhouse.

She had ridden out on the range a couple of hours before to ascertain why buzzards were wheeling above a gulch, and had been relieved to learn they were attracted by the carcass of a coyote some range rider had shot, instead of by a deceased Broken Wheel beef critter, as she had feared.

For, as had been the usual thing for a few years now, big Mike Murphy's Broken Wheel cattle outfit needed all its cows to turn into cash come roundup time; and the loss of even one might also mean to Molly the denial of something

Horning into a range feud and saving a man from the hangnoose is all part of the day's work for Molly Murphy, who won't live like a lady!

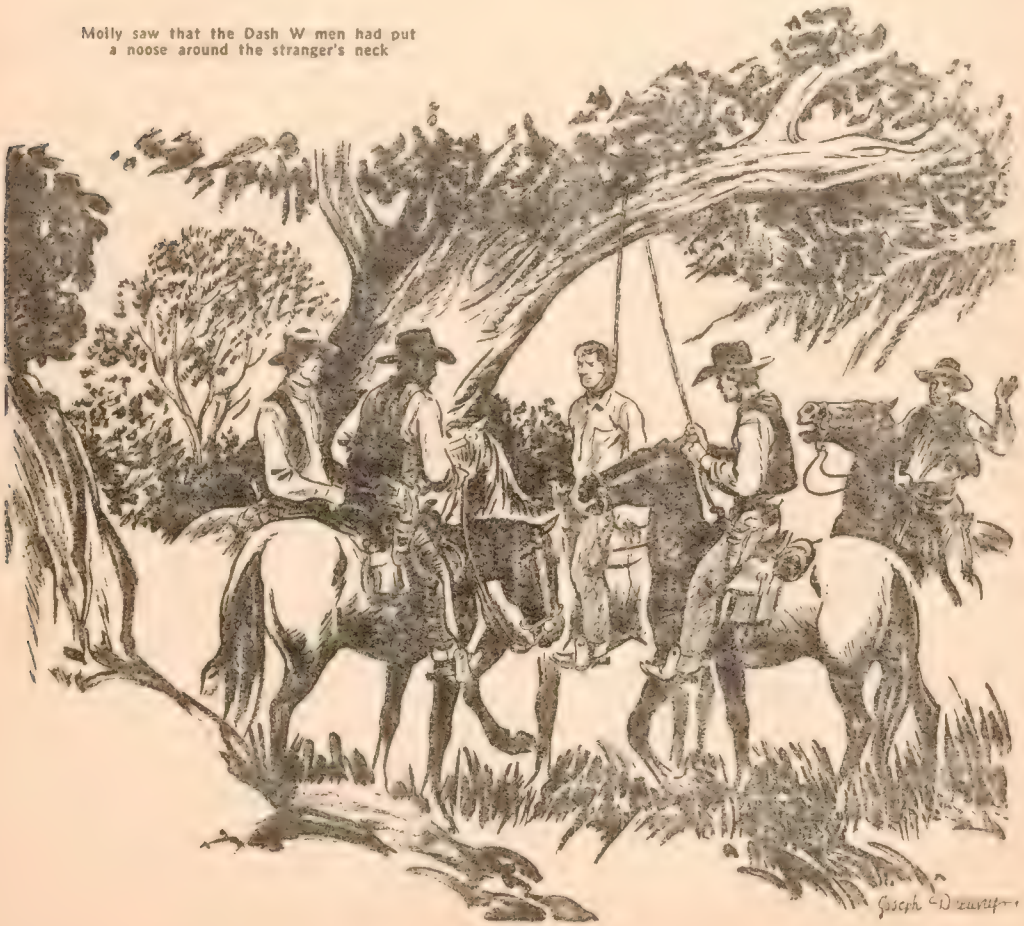
she yearned to buy for the adornment of either herself or the Broken Wheel ranchhouse. The ranchhouse really needed it more, Molly being adorned by Mother Nature already and younger than the ranch house by a score of years.

Now as she loped her spotted pony, Dodger, around the shoulder of a rocky hill beneath the sweltering Wyoming midday sun, she straightened quickly in her saddle and lifted her head like a person startled.

The brisk hot wind had carried to her ears sounds of hoofs pounding the flinty earth in rapid tattoo, the hoarse voices of excited men calling to one another, somebody shouting orders, and a scattering gunfire. Such sounds usually meant trouble in any part of the rangeland, but on the Battle Valley range the trouble was almost certain to be of a violent variety.

Molly swerved her pony sharply and put him at the steep slope of the rocky hillside that led to the crest. She helped him with her body balanced perfectly

Molly saw that the Dash W men had put a noose around the stranger's neck



in the saddle, her expert handling of the reins, and her encouraging voice.

During the necessarily slow ascent, Molly continued to hear sounds that warned of trouble. There was no more gunfire; but she could hear the high-pitched voice of some man pleading wildly, and other men laughing at him.

"Keep at it, Dodger!" she urged her pony. "Some Dash W hoodlums are up to devilment, no doubt. They're probably hitting the trail home from town after swigging squirrel whisky."

SHE bent forward in her saddle—a slender girl of average height and weight, garbed in badly-worn overalls tucked into boots with rundown heels, a man's shirt with patched elbows, and a tattered man's hat in which crows would have scorned to nest. Curls of her brown hair snapped in the wind as she rode, and her brown eyes were squinted against the sun's brassy glare.

Over the brow of the hill, the wind carried to her ears now the excited voice of a man: "You're makin' a bad mistake, gents. Stop and consider what you're aimin' to do. Give me a chance to explain. You're a mite high with liquor and maybe don't realize what you're doing."

"So we're drunk, huh?" a coarse voice interrupted. "But not too drunk to know a horse thief when we catch one. You fit the description we got."

"You're makin' a mistake. I can prove it."

"Aw, string him up, and let's get home!" a third voice said.

Molly had reached the top of the hill now, and she looked down upon the scene as she stopped her tired pony. She saw Newt Binner, Rod Sells and two other Dash W riders she knew, with their ponies crowded around the mount of a stranger and hemming him in so he could not break away and ride.

The Dash W men held menacing guns. A noose had been put around the stranger's neck, and his own holster was empty. And the horses were standing beneath the thick straight limb of an old giant cottonwood—a limb that had borne gruesome fruit before.

Molly guessed the Dash W riders had encountered the stranger on the trail, one probably had mentioned that he resembled the description of a notorious horse thief badly wanted in the next county, and their liquor-inflamed minds had reached a quick conclusion as to the man's guilt.

Molly knew they were capable of stringing up the stranger and riding on to the Dash W ranch to brag of their exploit. If the man's innocence were established afterward, they would admit that they had made a fool mistake and brush the affair aside as of small consequence.

Remembering the tone and earnestness of the stranger's voice as he had begged for his life, Molly felt reasonably sure of his innocence. And she reacted to the situation as her friends would have expected her to do.

The twenty-year-old girl was the motherless daughter of Mike Murphy, the wild man of the local range, who owned the tumbledown Broken Wheel outfit. Molly was known as a madcap. And now her quick Irish rage at unfairness and injustice decided her next move.

Her arrival had not been noticed by the men below her, but she had been watching them carefully. Now she saw two of the Dash W riders struggle briefly with the stranger and get his wrists lashed behind his back.

She saw Rod Sells, Newt Binner's right-hand man in meanness, toss the rope over the tree limb. Then he tied the end of the rope securely to the bole of the tree. And she watched as Binner, the worst of the Dash W's evil crew, swerved his horse to one side and lifted his arm as if to give a signal.

When Binner's arm dropped, the stranger's horse would be urged forward, and the stranger left dangling at the end of the rope with his feet a distance off the ground, twisting and

writhing in the agonies of strangulation. His death would be slow and horrible.

Molly's right hand darted down and snaked her heavy Colt's from its holster. She used her spurs on Dodger, fired a shot into the air, and gave a wild yell all at the same instant. The pony started down the hillside toward the tree, sending a shower of gravel at the men below.

Startled by the interruption, the Dash W riders turned and started to lift their weapons, but recognized Molly and stopped.

Many times they had wished Molly Murphy a man so she could be dealt with as one. But because she was a girl, violent action against her was denied them. Even on the Battle Valley range —so named for a conflict in the early Indian war days—cowpunchers did not engage in gun duels with women. Even former hill riders and known outlaws frowned on that.

Now, Molly fired a second shot over the heads of the Dash W men and urged her pony on down the slope. They understood what that shot meant. One quickly cut the rope which bound the wrists of the stranger, and another removed the noose from around his neck, and all backed their ponies away.

MOLLY stopped near them, the Colt's held ready to deal with any rebellion against her wishes. Her brown eyes were ablaze as she looked them over, and her lips curled with scorn.

"You drunken Dash W renegades!" she shrilled at them. "So you would string up a man for the fun of it! You'd simply murder him. And do it on Broken Wheel land, at that."

"You don't understand, Molly," Newt Binner yelled at her. "He's a horse thief. We've got a right—"

Molly's threatening glance stopped his speech. Newt Binner—tall and rangy, hawk-faced, with a slovenly drooping black mustache, a three days' beard, foul clothing—she loathed him and his kind, and let him know it.

"Have you proof that this man is a horse thief?" she demanded. "Have you investigated him? Sure of what you're doing?" She turned to eye the stranger, who was struggling mentally to realize he had been saved at the last instant from a violent death. "Are you a horse thief?" she asked him.

"No, ma'am," he replied, with vehemence.

"Then explain yourself."

"I was on my way to the Broken Wheel ranch, tendin' to my own business, when these men jumped me. They shot at me and grabbed me before I could draw my gun. They've been guzzlin' in town, as a person can see. Didn't give me a chance to explain about myself."

"You were riding to the Broken Wheel? I'm Molly Murphy, and my Pop owns that outfit. What do you want to see Pop about?"

"Got a letter for him. I've rid all the way from down in Colorado with it. Pete Smith, your Pop's old friend down there, sent me with the letter."

Molly glanced swiftly at the Dash W men to make sure they were up to no tricks, and then back at the stranger. "It's true that Pop and Pete Smith write each other about once a year," she admitted. "But they've always trusted their letters to a mail bag before this. How come this letter is so important that Pete Smith sends a rider so far with it?"

"How should I know? You don't think I opened and read it, do you?" the stranger asked, with a show of indignation.

"What's your name?"

"Jack Duane," he informed her.

"Aw, heck, Molly, he's funnin' you!" Newt Binner put in. "He fits the description of the horse thief."

Molly raised the muzzle of her Colt's a few inches and eyed him, and Binner ceased speaking.

"Give him back his gun, Binner," she ordered.

"But maybe he's tryin' to lie his way

out of this," Binner protested. "How do you know he's even got a letter?"

Molly faced Jack Duane again. "Show it," she ordered.

Duane dug into an inside shirt pocket and brought forth a crumpled and perspiration-stained envelope with Mike Murphy's name scrawled on it. Molly nodded that she was satisfied, and turned to Binner again.

"All right! Give him his gun," she said.

Binner swung his pony forward and thrust the gun at Duane, who examined it and slipped it into its holster.

"Now, Newt Binner, you and your pals hit the home trail," Molly commanded. "When you Dash W men stay too long in one place it smells so afterward that even buzzards keep away from it. This is Broken Wheel land you're polluting. Get going!"

Binner and his men eyed the stranger again. "We'll know you when we meet next time, Mr. Duane, as you name yourself," Binner said.

"You're welcome to remember me," Duane replied. "But you'll never jump me again when I'm ridin' along tendin' to my own business, because I'll be on guard now, havin' learned what kind of polecats roam this range."

"Why, you coyote!" Binner began.

"Hold it!" Molly warned, raising her gun again. "And you hold it, too, Mr. Duane! If there's any shooting to be done around here, I'll do it. Binner, hit the trail with your hoodlums, as I said."

BINNER continued looking at Duane. "Perhaps we'll be meetin' again when you can't hide behind a woman's skirts," he said.

"She ain't wearin' skirts, but overalls," Duane corrected. "And I won't hide behind any woman, as you'll learn fast enough if you and your pals ever jump me again. But no more than two of you at a time, please, and always from in front."

"Why, you—you rat!" Binner exploded.

"You goin' to ride?" Molly snapped, urging her pony forward.

"Oh, we'll ride," Binner decided. "But you, Duane—we'll be remember-in' this when we meet again."

"That's all right with me. And I'll be rememberin' that you called me a horse thief."

Binner hesitated an instant, half choking with rage, then gestured to the others, and the four Dash W men spurred and rode.

Duane turned to Molly. "Thanks for showin' up just when you did and savin' my life," he said.

"Prove to me it was worth saving," Molly told him, as she gathered her reins.

For the first time, she had a chance to inspect him carefully. Not bad! Tall, just a trifle stringy, about twenty-five, yellow hair, blue eyes—and a smile.

"Let me see that letter," she ordered.

"I'm sorry, but I've got orders to hand this letter to nobody but Mike Murphy. It's Pete Smith's orders, and an order from him shouldn't be triffled with. Anyhow, how do I know you're Mike Murphy's daughter?"

"I told you so, didn't I?" she snapped. "So you don't believe me. You think I'm a liar. Why, you insolent ingrate!" She gulped with Irish rage. Then the wrath fled from her face, and her eyes twinkled and she smiled. "Have it your way. Always obey orders," she said. "Probably Pete Smith made you carry that letter away up here just to get rid of you, anyhow."

CHAPTER II
Result of a Letter

AS THEY rode up to the Broken Wheel ranchhouse, big Mike Murphy was sprawled in an old rocking chair on the front porch. He hadn't shaved for three days, and he wore a dirty shirt. In his eyes was the vacant

stare of a half-dead man, a stare that had been in them for some time.

Molly introduced Jack Duane and told the story of the attempt at lynching, and Duane handed Murphy the letter.

In a half-hearted manner, Murphy asked Duane about his old friend, Pete Smith, and listened to the replies, and nodded. He turned the letter over and over in his hands, looking down at it.

"Listen, Pop!" Molly said. "Mr. Duane has ridden all the way from down in Colorado with that letter, with orders to give it to nobody but you. Maybe you better read it and find out what this is all about, huh?"

Mike Murphy dislodged the flap of the envelope with a grimy forefinger, and extracted several sheets of paper covered with scrawled writing. Hunched to a more comfortable position in the rocking chair, he read that letter.

Duane leaned against the porch railing and made and lit a cigarette, and Molly paced back and forth, glancing down at the bunkhouse and corral and across the burning land toward the distant mountains.

She saw her father straighten up and start to go through the long letter again. Once, he looked up and inspected Duane as if he never had noticed him before. When he finished reading the letter a second time, he folded the sheets of paper and returned them to the envelope, and stared across country like a man who sees nothing.

"Well, Pop, what's it all about?" Molly questioned. "Good news, or bad? Good news would be quite a surprise for the Broken Wheel."

Murphy braced his shoulders at mention of the name. He looked at the big barn beyond the bunkhouse, where the ranch brand was painted over the door —a wagon wheel with a segment broken out of it.

Molly watched him carefully—she never had seen him like this before. He seemed to have experienced a shock, but one that was beneficial. New life came into his eyes, and he braced his massive shoulders again, and when he spoke to her the old snap was in his voice:

"Molly, get into the house and clean up. Go to the kitchen and make coffee and somethin' for Mr. Jack Duane to eat. No doubt he's tired and hungry after his ride from Battle Valley and his ruckus with the Dash W bunch and all."

"Yes, Pop. But that letter?"

"I'll tell you about it later. Git, now! I want to talk to this man. And I want to hear pots and pans rattlin' in the kitchen, so I'll know you ain't listenin' through the parlor window."

Molly shook her head and went into the house. She washed her face and hands and went to the kitchen and put on the coffee pot, and sliced some bacon and got out a few eggs and a loaf of home-made bread.

As she worked, she reviewed mentally a section of the past. Eight years before, the Broken Wheel had been a prosperous ranch, more so than Henry Wellton's Dash W. True, Mike Murphy was running on bank money, but what stockman was not?

Then trouble had started. First, a poor market one year, when most of the beef herd went to pay interest on the mortgage. The same the second year. And the third year the hoof-and-mouth disease had struck, and most of the Broken Wheel's good breeding stock had to be destroyed.

Mike Murphy began to break under the blows of adversity. Molly and her mother encouraged him and tried to cheer him up, and their love and devotion had a good effect. Then came the final blow: Molly's mother caught a cold which developed into pneumonia, and in three days was dead.

THAT blow seemed to finish Big Mike. He went around after that like a lifeless man, neglecting everything, seemingly devoid of ambition, the old fighting spirit gone from him. Molly had taken over the management of the house, and though she spent many tear-

ful hours in her own room, she was always cheerful in her father's presence.

For five years that had gone on. The Broken Wheel had gone from bad to worse. Now it was only a wreck of a ranch. In the bunkhouse were three men—two old-timers, Seth Jackson and Jed Moore, who worked for their keep and tobacco money; and one middle-aged man, Bill Casey, who did most of the work and took a dollar or two when Mike Murphy had it to spare.

Molly cooked for the entire outfit. Her chickens furnished eggs and meat for the pot. Fences and buildings were not repaired. There was no snap to the place. Molly and her father went around dressed like scarecrows most of the time. There were few visitors, and trips to town were far between.

Now, as she prepared something for Jack Duane to eat, she wondered what the letter from Pete Smith meant. It seemed strange to her that a rider would be sent so far with it, instead of it being sent by mail.

A murmur of voices drifted through the house and to her ears as her father and Jack Duane talked out on the porch. And after a time she heard them enter the house. Her father went to his own room, and Duane came into the kitchen.

"Hate to have you go to trouble on account of me," he told Molly.

"No trouble. Had to get grub for Pop anyhow. And I like to eat sometimes, too. The three men are out on the range today, and carried a noontime snack with them."

He sat at the kitchen table and swigged coffee and waded into the meal. Molly watched him as he ate. He was the only new man she had seen on the range for several years. He was the only man around who was anywhere near her own age and who looked half way decent, instead of like an outlaw who had forgotten how to sleep in a bed.

He finished eating and made a fresh cigarette. Molly stacked the soiled dishes in the sink and prepared to wash them. Her father had not appeared, and she wondered about that. But just as she was going to hint to Duane about the letter, her father came into the kitchen.

Molly blinked at him. His face was shaved—she had heard the pump squeak but had thought nothing of it. He wore a clean shirt and a clean pair of overalls, and his boots were cleaned for the first time in weeks. His eyes were gleaming.

"Molly, you've been a mighty good girl," Big Mike praised. "You've run the house and also made a hand at times out on the range. That's done!"

"What you mean, Pop?" she asked, amazed.

"From now on, one of the old-timers will cook in the shack for the bunkhouse crew. You'll keep the house, and that's all. No more ridin' on the range except for your own pleasure. I've got a mite of money stowed away—meant it in case of my death—but I've decided not to die for a long time. Today or tomorrow you'll take some of it to town and get a new dress and stuff and anything you want for the house."

"You finally gone mad, Pop?" she broke in.

"Finally come sane again," he told her. "That letter from Pete Smith did it. He's a real friend, that man! From my letters to him he gathered I'd gone to pot along with the Broken Wheel. He blistered me in writin'. No man's licked unless he licks himself, he wrote me. Said I owed it to him, and to you, to make a new start."

"Oh, Pop, I'm so glad!" Tears came into Molly's eyes. "I've worried so, wondering where it'd all end."

THE old ranchman paused for a moment, then continued in shaking tones.

"I haven't been a good father to you, Molly. Pete told me that, too. And he—he sent Jack Duane to stay here with us and help me get goin' again. Jack's a first rate cowhand, he wrote—was *se-*

gundo of Pete's outfit. He knew Jack's folks, and took Jack in when his parents died and left him alone."

"Oh, Pop!"

"And money help if I need it, Molly, without tryin' to borrow from the countyseat bank and gettin' snubbed. I can hold up my head again. And Pete wrote that—that I owed it to the memory of your Ma to make good again—" Mike Murphy choked and turned toward the kitchen door.

"Where you going, Pop?" Molly asked. "Don't you want grub?"

"I'll eat this evenin' after the men come ridin' in. I've got to check on things to be done right away—fences fixed, barn patched up, corral mended, and all. Have to haul lumber and stuff out from town."

"But, where's the money for all that?" Molly questioned.

"Pete Smith sent enough for your father to get started—sent it by me," Duane put in. "Plenty more where that comes from, providin' I report that your father is wakin' up and makin' a new start."

"Oh, I—I could kiss you!" Molly squealed, her face flaming and her eyes glistening with tears. "And to think those Dash W skunks might have strung you up!"

He grinned at her. "I might consider that kiss some time later, ma'am," he replied.

CHAPTER III
Evening Visitors

THE sudden turn of events for the better on the Broken Circle was associated in Molly's mind then and forever afterward with the arrival of Jack Duane. And the rejuvenation of the old ranch began as soon as Molly had washed and Duane had dried the dishes. Having anyone dry the dishes for her was itself an astounding novelty.

They helped Mike Murphy clean out the old cook shack and put therein utensils, dishes, food stocks and fuel.

"You'll feed the men tonight as usual, Molly, and startin' tomorrow one of the old-timers can play cook. Seth Jackson and Jed Moore can take turns at it," her father said.

They went to the bunkhouse and did a lot of cleaning there. Duane decided he would live in the bunkhouse with the men, work with them, urge them on, arouse their spirits and pep them to the idea that the Broken Wheel was on the way to being a real ranch again.

"I've got an old pack mare, and left her in the town stable at Battle Valley along with the pack," Duane said. "Wanted to ride out here and see how things were first, before I brought out my outfit. I'll ride in early tomorrow and fetch the mare out with my stuff."

"I'll ride with you," Molly said, "and buy some things we need badly, and order more things."

"And I'll take the wagon in a couple of days later and pick everything up," Mike Murphy added. "I'm goin' to startle the men some by takin' them to town and givin' them a payday to date and lettin' them have a little spree, like old days. I'll give Jed Moore and Seth Jackson a whole plug of chewin' tobacco each, and make 'em buy new boots, overalls and shirts so's they won't look like scarecrows any more."

"You might get some yourself, Pop," Molly told him, with a grin.

"I'll be a range dude," he promised.

Her eyes misted with tears again as she turned away from him. Mike Murphy was rapidly becoming his real self. The change was apparent already.

"How about Bill Casey, Pop?" she asked.

"Full wages to date, that's what Bill will get. He's been a good man and a hard worker. He could have left me and got a good job with regular pay somewhere, but he didn't."

The men came riding in an hour be-

fore sunset, turned their ponies into the corral, washed up, and got the news about eating in the cook shack. After the evening chores were done, Mike Murphy went to the bunkhouse with Duane and Molly.

"Day after tomorrow, we're startin' regular paydays on this ranch," Mike told the men. "We're gettin' out of the trance we've been in and goin' to work. I'll take you waddies into town for a spree. This here young gent is Jack Duane, sent me by my old friend, Pete Smith, of Colorado. He used to be Pete's *segundo*. He's foreman of the Broken Wheel, startin' as of now."

Molly was watching the men as her father talked. She almost giggled at sight of their faces when they heard pay promised. And she saw them estimate Jack Duane after her father's announcement.

The two old-timers seemed pleased, though they had been assigned the job of cooking for the hands. But Bill Casey did not. Molly saw his eyes squint as he inspected Duane carefully. Casey turned aside without saying a word. Mike Murphy did not notice it. If Duane did, he made no comment.

Came the evening with a faint breeze mitigating the day's heat, and a full moon bluing the landscape. Mike Murphy sat in the old rocking chair on the porch and talked to Duane, who leaned against the railing and smoked. Molly sat on the steps and felt happier than she had in years.

BOOTS crunched gravel at the end of the porch, and Jed Moore, the old-timer who was to do the cooking tomorrow, appeared before them in the moonlight, his manner apologetic.

"Pardon me, Miss Molly, but I need stuff to fix the flapjack batter for mornin'," he reported. "Got everything else I need."

"I'll get the stuff, Jed," she said, getting up from the steps to enter the house.

"Riders comin'!" Duane announced.

Flapjack materials were forgotten. Mike Murphy got out of the chair and went to the railing.

"Half a dozen men—and I can see that big white gelding plain in the moonlight," Mike said. "That's Henry Wellton's mount."

"Where'll I find guns and ammunition?" Duane asked.

"Rifles and shells in the cupboard," Molly answered.

Duane took charge as if Mike Murphy had not been there. "Hustle to the bunkhouse, Jed, and get the other men up here. Meet me at the kitchen door," he ordered. "You sit still, Big Mike. Show me that cupboard, Molly."

He charged into the house with Molly close behind him. She opened the cupboard, and Duane took out three rifles and a quantity of shells. His own gunbelt was in the hall, where he had removed it before the evening meal. Now he buckled it on and stuffed cartridges into the loops.

"You keep out of this, Molly," he ordered sharply. "Stay in the background. If there's trouble, don't try to mix in it. That's an order."

"If there's trouble, I'll fight beside the rest of you for the Broken Wheel," she informed him.

"Mike made me foreman of this outfit—remember?"

"I was his daughter long before you were his foreman."

Duane smiled slightly, but wasted no time in argument. He picked up the rifles and hurried to the back door, to find the three men waiting for him.

"Jed, get to the north end of the porch and stay back in the shadows at first," he directed. "Seth Jackson, do the same at the south end. Casey, be at that big tree at the end of the lane. This may mean nothin', or it may mean trouble."

"Knowin' this range and these men comin', maybe I could handle the situation better and without a fight," Casey said.

"I'm foreman of this ranch, Casey!" Duane's voice was harsh. Let's have an

understandin' about that right here and now! Get to your posts!"

The men moved away, and Duane hurried back through the house and emerged on the porch. Mike Murphy was in the rocking chair, but Molly had taken him his gunbelt. Molly sat in the old place on the steps. Duane calmly rolled and lit a cigarette as the riders turned into the Broken Wheel lane and loped toward the house.

The bright light from the full moon revealed them clearly. Henry Wellton, the Dash W's owner, rode his big white gelding. He had five riders with him. As they stopped their mounts a short distance from the house, those on the porch could make out Newt Binner, his side-kick Rod Sells, and the other two men who had been in the would-be lynching party. There was another man Duane did not know.

Wellton rode forward from the group, and Mike Murphy got up and walked to the steps and stood there looking at the Dash W's owner, his unkempt silvery gray hair like a halo in the moonlight.

"Howdy, Wellton!" he greeted. Ridin' late, aren't you?"

It was Mike's old manner—the manner of a man who felt licked and was ready to take the kicks of the world. Both Molly and Duane glanced at him sharply, both wondering whether he had reverted to that condition or whether the manner now was assumed for a purpose.

Wellton's manner was arrogant as he replied, "We're ridin' because the welfare of this range demands it. I understand you're harborin' a horse thief on your ranch. Some of my men caught him and were goin' to string him up, as he deserved, when your girl interfered. My men couldn't gunfight a woman, so they rode to the ranch and told me about it."

"Interestin'," Mike Murphy commented. "Truth is, though, the man wasn't a horse thief, and Molly kept your drunken punchers from committin' a murder."

WELLTON stared at Murphy for a moment, then scowled fiercely.

"Talkin' a mite big, aren't you, Murphy?"

"You're right about that!" Mike replied, and his voice rang with the old fire, and Duane felt relieved and Molly rejoiced. "You're not runnin' this range, Wellton!"

"Maybe you think you are, with your tumbledown outfit," Wellton said. "Down to eatin' your own beef!"

"I'm not tryin' to run the range, but I'm runnin' my Broken Wheel!" Mike declared. "The man you're talkin' about brought me a letter from Colorado that changed a lot of things hereabouts. He's vouched for by an old friend—"

"But do you know him?" Wellton interrupted. "Wouldn't be anything new if he'd met up with the right man and made away with him and come on in his place, pretendin' to be him. That'd be a good plan for a horse thief wantin' to hide out."

Duane stepped closer to Mike and could be seen plainly in the moonlight.

"There's the man, boss!" Newt Binner yelled at Wellton. "Fits the description of the horse thief, doesn't he?"

"He does," Wellton decided.

The Dash W's owner rode still closer to the bottom of the steps, and this time the other men urged their ponies after his. Henry Wellton, tall and straight, with the manner of a cavalry general in the old days, pointed his finger at Mike Murphy.

"We'll have no shillyshallyin' about this, Murphy," he announced. "I've decided what's to be done. My men maintain that this Duane is the horse thief. We don't intend to let him escape, if he is. So we'll take him to the Dash W and hold him prisoner until we're sure."

Mike Murphy's shoulders were braced suddenly, and he seemed to bristle. Watching him, Molly felt a glow of pride. Her father certainly had changed back into his former self. He was aggressive, had a degree of self-assurance.

"No bunch of men comes to my ranch and takes away one of my men without my say-so, Wellton," he said. "I know Duane's not the horse thief. Know where he came from and when he got here. When that horse thief started rampagin' around in the next county, Duane was far away. And don't come around here tryin' to make believe you're a heavyweight, Wellton! Give me a year, and I'll have a better stocked ranch than the Dash W ever was or will be."

"The countyseat bank won't lend you a dime, Murphy."

"Don't need their money. I'll have all I need, and more."

"Got plenty of money, have you?" Wellton crossed his wrists on the pommel of his saddle and bent forward. "That's right interestin', Murphy. This stranger comes to the Broken Wheel, and suddenly you have plenty of money. Could it be possible your ranch is a clearin' house for stolen ridin' stock?"

"Why, you side-winder!" Mike Murphy bent forward, and his hand went toward his holster.

Duane stepped forward quickly and grasped Mike's arm and thrust him aside and faced Wellton and his men.

"I'm foreman of the Broken Wheel, gents," Duane said. "It's for me to handle this mater. No sense in botherin' Mr. Murphy with it. Take your men and get off this ranch, Wellton!"

"You darin' to talk to me like that?" Wellton roared. "You horse thief!"

Molly had smuggled her Colt's out of the house when Duane had not been watching, and had it beside her on the porch. And now she suddenly was on her feet, and the weapon was held ready for business.

"You're a skunk, Wellton!" she cried at the Dash W's owner. "How dare you talk to my Pop like that? If you're as honest as him—which I doubt—you'll fire the outlaws you've got in your bunkhouse. Get riding!"

Newt Binner's laughter rang out. "What'd I tell you, boss?" he yelled at Wellton. "Murphy, and this Duane—always hidin' behind a woman."

Molly felt herself seized suddenly and almost violently. Duane took the gun from her hand ungently. As she started to protest, she was propelled across the porch and through the front door and into the house. Duane almost tossed her into the room. He got the key from the lock inside, and closed the door with a bang and locked it on the outside. Then he whirled back to the steps to stand beside Mike Murphy again.

"No woman here for me to hide behind now," Duane told the Dash W men. "Any time you want trouble, I'm ready. But try not to gang up on me. Get off the Broken Wheel! And before you start to make a bad move, take a squint at the corners of the porch."

THEY looked—and saw the oldtimers, Seth Jackson and Jed Moore, with rifles held ready.

"Come out from the tree, Casey!" Duane yelled.

There was a moment of hesitation, then Casey came into the moonlight holding the rifle Duane had supplied him.

"Two moth-eaten old crowbaits workin' for grub and tobacco," Wellton scorned the old-timers. "And Casey—I'm surprised at you, Casey. You'd fit in almost any bunkhouse, on some prosperous ranch. I'd be glad to have you at the Dash W. Why you hang on here is more'n anybody can understand."

Casey said nothing. Duane hooked his thumbs into his belt.

"Take your bunch and get goin', Wellton!" he ordered again. "And I don't want any more of this horse thief talk! I'll hold responsible any man I hear makin' it from now on. If any of you—Binner, for instance—has a dislike for what I'm sayin', I'll make it easy for you to find me. And I won't be hidin' behind any woman, either."

"I'll be rememberin' that, Duane!" Binner yelled, angrily.

"Remember it somewhere else,"

Duane told him. "You're not wanted around here, any of you. Use your spurs!"

For an instant, trouble impending, they faced one another. The Dash W men were waiting for Wellton's sign. The two old-timers and Casey held their rifles ready. Neither Duane nor Mike Murphy had gun free of holster.

"There'll be somethin' more to this, Murphy," Wellton threatened.

"Get rid of some of the scum you've got in your bunkhouse and we can all live in peace," Mike replied. "You're here right now because some of 'em made you believe a mess of lies. Think that over as you ride home."

Wellton said nothing. He lifted his hand in signal and wheeled his big white gelding, and his men followed him down the lane.

"Now, you can let Molly out of the house, Duane, and take a mess of her blisterin' tongue," Mike Murphy said.

She spoke herself from the end of the porch. "I'm right here—been here for quite some time. There's a back door to this house—remember?" She swaggered into the bright moonlight and started for the steps, her heavy gun dangling in her right hand. "You gents did pretty well without me here," she admitted. "But you'd have needed my big Colt's on your side if it'd come to a shooting fuss."

She stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked up, first at her father and then at Duane. Her eyes glowed when she noticed her father exhibiting the demeanor of an old war horse sniffing the smoke of battle. And she smiled when her eyes met those of Duane.

For some reason, there was no use of a blistering tongue.

NEXT ISSUE

TENDERFOOT TREASURE

An Exciting Romantic Novelet

By PAUL EVAN LEHMAN

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER IV
Trouble in Town

MOLLY went to the corral the following morning, wearing the big Colt. Bill Casey had prepared her pony for the trail, and Dodger was prancing and eager for a run. Jack Duane came from the bunkhouse ready for the trip.

"Why the hardware?" he asked, indicating her gun.

"Might get a chance to shoot a rattlesnake," she remarked. "Or a skunk."

"Many skunks around here?"

"A lot of them, but not too many with stripes down their backs. A lot of smell, though."

Duane grinned as he got into the saddle. He looked down at Casey. "You and the old-timers just get that work lined up," he ordered.

Casey merely nodded and turned away without replying, his face inscrutable.

"Casey doesn't like you," Molly warned Duane, as they loped their horses side by side to the end of the lane and turned into the town trail.

"I've got my eyes on him. Casey is one of these men you can't tell about," Duane replied.

It was quite a distance to Battle Valley, and they took it easily, letting their ponies set the pace. Molly kept up a fire of conversation which compelled Duane to make replies, and they learned considerable about each other.

"You can go to the stable and get your pack mare ready for the trail," Molly said, as they neared the little cowtown. "I'll go to the store, and you can find me there."

She turned her cow pony in to the hitch-rail in front of the store, and Duane continued on to the town stable. Here he claimed his mare, put on the pack, and paid his bill.

"Understand you're the new Broken Wheel foreman," the stableman said.

"News gets around fast," Duane commented.

"A lot of rumors concernin' the Broken Wheel. Folks say you've had a run-in already with some of the Dash W bunch. I ain't in any position to take sides, for business reasons. But I like to see fair play."

"Be seein' you again," Duane said, as he got into the saddle and prepared to lead the mare up to the store and tie her there.

"Hope so," the stableman said. "I like to see a young man get along. I've always liked Big Mike Murphy and Molly. Shame Mike went to pieces like he did."

"He's braced up considerable since yesterday," Duane said.

"I might mention that Newt Binner and Rod Sells are in town, probably in the saloon. For some reason, they tied their ponies behind the blacksmith shop instead to a hitch-rail in plain sight. Probably don't want everybody to know they're in town."

Duane eyed him. "Probably that's it," he replied. "Thanks."

"I ain't sidin' anybody, understand. I'm just scatterin' talk around. Good luck."

Duane shifted his holster before he rode up the street.

Meanwhile, Molly was having the best day of her life for the past five years. She was ordering lavishly, and telling the old storekeeper to bundle everything, that her father would be in the day after tomorrow or later and get the stuff and buy a lot of building supplies. Cash money, she told the storekeeper. And he was to have his bill ready, too, and have cash on hand so Mike Murphy could pay off his hands.

All that excited the storekeeper. He made Molly a present of a box of candy and a small bolt of lace. He reminded her that the coffee pot was on the stove in his living quarters in the rear, that the cracker barrel was open, and that sardines, cheese and canned fruit could be had for the asking.

Glancing through the dirt-streaked window, Molly saw Jack Duane tying his pony and the mare to the hitch-rail. She watched him scrutinizing the street as he did so. She saw him straighten up on the walk, hitch his gunbelt a little, and tug at his hat to pull it down—so it would shade his eyes better from the sun glare.

IT SEEMED to Molly that during their ride to town she had got to know him as well as if they had been acquainted for years. There was nothing secretive or subtle about Jack Duane. He was wide open in speech and action. And her father had let her read Pete Smith's letter the night before, and the letter had said a lot about Jack Duane.

Wonder if I'm falling in love with the cuss? Molly thought as she watched him through the window. Her face flushed at the idea. Perhaps it was because she had not met any young man for a few years—that is, any who could be looked upon as a possible husband, she told herself.

The old storekeeper was telling her to call Duane in to have something to eat at the store's expense, and Molly merely mumbled something in reply. She got up quickly, too, from the old chair upon which she was sitting. For, through the dirty window, she had seen Jack Duane suddenly bend slightly forward, balance his body on the balls of his feet, and hook his thumbs into his gunbelt, with the right hand in position for a quick drop to the holster he wore.

Molly went swiftly to the open door. As she reached it, she heard Newt Binner's voice:

"So you've dared to come ridin' to town!"

"It didn't take any darin', Binner," Duane snapped in reply. "Had some business here."

"You haven't any business at all on this range, Duane. We don't like your kind hereabouts."

"Because I'm not an outlaw or rene-

gade, you mean? You accused me of bein' a horse thief. I'd think you and your bunch would welcome such."

"You're startin' to talk yourself into trouble, Duane," Binner warned.

Molly was listening, watching, glancing up and down the street. She could see Binner standing at the hitch-rail in front of the saloon, not more than twenty feet from Duane. She saw a few men in the street dodge into buildings as if they expected gunplay. And she glanced across the street at the blacksmith shop, and saw Rod Sells, Binner's side-kick, standing back in the shadows with his hand on his holster.

Binner's voice came to her again: "Any time you care to make a move, Duane, I'm ready."

"No call for me to make one yet, as I can see," Duane said.

Molly darted suddenly through the door and out upon the walk. The Colt's was in her hand and the muzzle raised. She was between the two instantly.

"Hold it!" she said.

"Keep out of this, Molly!" Duane ordered.

"You've always got a woman to hide behind, Duane," Binner said.

"Go back into the store, Molly!" Duane told her. "This is a business that seems to call for settlement."

"I'm stayin' right here," she said. "You're a Broken Wheel man now, and I don't stand by and watch one of our men get what you might call bushwhacked." She eyed Binner, and lifted her voice. "You, Rod Sells! Lift that gun and I'll blow your pal, Binner, in half!"

Duane had glanced swiftly at the blacksmith shop, and had seen the trap. If he had gone for his gun, Sells would have cut him down before he could have exchanged shots with Binner. They had been waiting only until he started to draw.

"Might have expected somethin' like this," Duane said. "A very slick ambush, eh? Tell your pal, Rod Sells, to come out into the street, Newt, and I'll take on the pair of you. Molly, get back into the store!"

"I'm staying right here," she stated. "If there's any shooting, I'll side you."

"The whole range is goin' to learn how you hide behind a woman, Duane," Binner taunted.

Molly kept her Colt's on Binner and strode toward him.

"You watch Sells, Jack," she told Duane. "I'll take care of Newt Binner while you handle his side-kick."

"I'll do that, and then handle Binner myself," Duane agreed. He called, "Walk out into the street with your hands up, Sells! Make it quick!"

DUANE snaked his gun out of its holster and strode into the street himself, turning his back on Binner, knowing Molly would hold him harmless. Men were looking through windows at the scene.

"Make it quick!" Duane yelled at Sells again.

Sells strode out into the sunshine with his hands half way up. He stopped ten feet from Duane.

"Unbuckle your belt and drop it," Duane ordered.

"So you're goin' to murder me?" Sells asked. "There's plenty to see."

"Do as you're told! I won't gun you down while you're unarmed. Your kind ain't worth gunnin'. My belt will hit the dust right after yours."

Rod Sells' eyes flickered. He fancied himself handy with his fists. He unbuckled his belt and dropped it and its gun-filled holster into the dirt. Watching him carefully, Duane dropped his own belt. As Rod Sells rushed him, he sidestepped expertly. He heard Molly's voice:

"Make a bad move, Binner, and I'll let you have a slug or two, so help me!"

Sells was short and heavy in body, and well muscled. Duane's appearance was deceptive. Tall and on the verge of being skinny, nevertheless he had muscles like steel springs. Clean living had paid him off well.

Sells rushed again, and this time Duane stood still and took the shock of the attack. Their fists thudded as they made it a toe-to-toe fight. Men emerged from the buildings and lined the walks to watch.

It was no one-sided fight. Duane's face was marked before the end of the first minute, but he gave as good as he received. They fought in a cloud of dust, gasping for breath, circling each other, rushing and retreating.

Sells began to tire. He tried to end the fight quickly, and could not. Slowly, surely, Duane was wearing him down. The men on the walk were shouting in excitement. As Duane circled, he caught sight of Molly standing a few feet from Newt Binner, her big Colt's trained on his breast. Nothing that happened out in the street could detract her attention from Binner.

Sells was getting groggy, and Duane began pressing the fighting. His fists drove into Sells' face, against his chest, hammered at his wind. Sells reeled and went down to sprawl in the dust.

"Hold Binner, Molly," Duane called in a voice somewhat weak. He lurched a few feet and stooped and picked up his own gunbelt and Sells'. He tossed his own on the walk, emptied Sells' gun of shells, and hurled the gun far into a heap of trash beside the blacksmith shop. Then he went back to the middle of the street.

"Drop your belt like a man and come out here, Binner!" he called.

Binner's eyes gleamed. He fancied himself as good as Sells in a rough-and-tumble fight. And Duane had just finished one battle and was wearied. Under Molly's watchful eyes, he removed his gunbelt and dropped it, and strode out into the street.

"I'm goin' to beat you to a pulp, Duane," he threatened. "And when you're down, I'm goin' to kick in your ribs and your face."

Duane did not reply. He was saving breath. His chest was heaving with his heavy breathing. Standing on the walk, still holding the Colt's, Molly watched.

It was a risky business for Jack Duane, taking on two such men one after the other without a rest, she thought. She called loudly:

"There'll be no rib-kicking, Binner, whatever happens. You'll fight fair for once."

"Still got a woman helpin' you, Duane?" Binner taunted.

He was working in close to Duane when he said it, and his remark touched off an explosion. Duane's right fist smashed into his mouth as Duane darted forward with commendable speed. Before Binner could recover from the surprise, Duane's left fist drove into his breast, and then his right came up from the ground and connected with the Dash W man's chin.

Binner reeled aside half dazed, covered up, fought for breath, and finally swerved aside from a rain of blows and came up fighting. While turning away, Duane glanced toward the walk. Some man had helped Rod Sells up from the dirt, and he was now sprawled on the walk, heaving. Molly was watching him closely and trying to watch the fight also.

THERE were times during the next five minutes when Duane was inclined to think he had asked for too much. But he called on what strength he had remaining to him and fought back with desperation. He heard Molly's voice cheering him on. He heard the men along the street shouting encouragement. He caught sight of the friendly stableman grinning and pounding his hands together.

Binner, too, felt his strength going, and made a desperate attempt to achieve a victory. Duane met him squarely to slug it out. He hurled himself at Binner with his last remaining strength, drove a jab at the stomach, swung heavily with his right at the chin. As Binner tottered, he drove across a left, then reeled away as the Dash W man fell.

Molly ran to aid him to the walk. Duane emptied Binner's gun as he had Sells', and hurled it into the trash pile beside the smithy. Then sat on the edge of the walk and waited until Molly brought water from the store.

Gently Molly bathed his battered face. She was laughing and crying at the same time. But she glanced toward Sells and Binner, too, watching to see they tried no treachery. She ceased to fear when she noticed some sturdy men of the town gathering around them.

"You eat," the storekeeper whispered to her, when she finally got Duane into the store. "I'll be standin' at the door to see what happens that might interest you."

When they mounted their ponies and left town some time later with Duane's pack mare following them faithfully, Binner and Sells were in the saloon, the storekeeper reported. So far, they had not even retrieved their guns.

And if they tried to leave town too soon, as if to pursue, certain men of the town would detain them. There would be no gun battle along the trail.

CHAPTER V
Bullets and Kisses

DURING the trip to the ranch, Molly kept watching Duane, studying his bruised face.

"What you acting so peeved about?" she asked, when they had traveled half the distance to the Broken Wheel without Duane saying much.

"I told you to keep out of it," Duane said. "It'll be all over the range that I take the warpath with a woman along."

"It'll be all over the range how you licked Sells and Binner one after the other, too. What a fight! Your face is a mess, but so are a couple of other faces. I love a fist fight. It's the Irish in me."

"Learn to stay out of men's business," he said, harshly. "I can do my own fightin'."

"I suppose I should have kept still and let Rod Sells plug you from the doorway of the blacksmith shop while you had your eyes on Newt Binner. I suppose I should have let them gunfight you two to one. They'd have done it, too."

"You chatter so much you make my head ache," he complained.

"Seems to me you're making big talk, Jack Duane. You're only the Broken Wheel's foreman, and I'm the owner's daughter. Remember? I was going to have you eat Sunday dinner in the house instead of the cook shack, with thick apple pie and all!"

So they quarreled all the way to the ranch.

It was not until three days later that Mike Murphy started for town with the men. He had carefully estimated the lumber and paint and nails he would need, and had made a list of tools. And at the last minute he decided to leave old Jed Moore at the ranch with Molly and Duane. He promised Jed to fetch him out tobacco and a flask of whisky, and new overalls and shirts and boots.

Mike Murphy drove the light wagon and the team of mules. Bill Casey and Seth Jackson rode ahead of him. In Mike's pocket was a long list of things Molly had forgotten to get in her excitement three days before.

Molly went about her housework singing happily. Duane and Jed Moore were repairing bunks in the bunkhouse, for it was the intention to take on a couple of more men when good ones could be found. Mike Murphy already had plans to buy for cash some yearlings to feed and fatten.

Jed Moore started from the bunkhouse to get more nails from the tool shed, but darted right back inside.

"Riders!" he said. "Better buckle on our belts, I reckon, and grab a rifle apiece, too."

Duane hurried to the door and looked out. Four riders were just entering the

lane. He recognized Newt Binner, Rod Sells and the two men who had been with them when they had tried to stretch Binner up to a tree limb.

"They'll never quit till they're dead," Jed Moore remarked. "Maybe we might pick off a couple from here before they open up on us. They might not know we're in the bunkhouse."

"They'll have to start it, if there's anything to be started," Duane replied. "I'm not in the habit of ambushin' folks."

"They're not folks, but wild animals —but have it your own way," Jed Moore replied.

They buckled on their gunbelts and picked up rifles. From the bunkhouse window, they saw the four Dash W men scatter and spread out. They approached the ranch buildings slowly and with evident caution, keeping behind trees and hedges and clumps of brush as much as possible.

"They must've been watchin' and seen us," Jed said to Duane. "It's the bunkhouse they're comin' at, like they knew we were here. Of course it's all over that Mike was goin' to take the men in for a payday spree and to get a load of stuff. That windy storekeeper told everybody that, you can bet."

Duane was grim as he spoke: "We'll let them make the first play, but we'll be ready for a showdown fight. They may try a trick or two."

"You can bet that Newt Binner and Rod Sells will be downright murderous, far as you're concerned," Jed said. "After the smashin' you gave 'em in town. The yarn about that is all over the range, and they can't stand to be laughed at. Binner and Sells have both ridden the outlaw trail, and it'd be like 'em to burn us out here and hit that trail again."

THEN they were quiet for a moment, and they could hear Molly singing in the house, and the clatter of pots and pans as she worked.

Molly was happy these days. There was a song in her heart as well as upon her lips. The change for the better in her father seemed almost a miracle to her. And she knew she had fallen in love with Jack Duane, and that he was the right sort of man. One of those quick things, she thought—but they always seemed to work out right.

When her Pop got home that night with the loaded wagon, there would be plenty to do. She had bought stuff to make new window curtains, and to cover some of the old chairs. She had ordered new bedding, new pots and pans and cooking utensils, foodstuffs they had gone without for some time. She would make a couple of new dresses, and—oh, there would be plenty to do for some time, things it would be a pleasure to do.

She went into the front room to do some dusting, and glanced through the window—and saw the riders approaching the buildings. She knew this meant a sneak attack while her father and two of the men were in town.

Molly streaked to the closet and got her gunbelt and bucked it on. She grabbed a rifle and chambered a shell in it and ran to the front window again. She knew Duane and Jed were working in the bunkhouse, and that they had weapons ready there, so did not shout an alarm. A shout might cause them to appear and disclose their whereabouts. She would wait until such a thing was necessary.

Newt Binner was riding beneath the trees down the lane. Rod Sells was circling behind a hedge and going toward the corral and bunkhouse. The other two men were approaching from different directions.

Molly did not wish to fire the first shot. She knew the intentions of the visitors were hostile, but she wanted them to declare it before she made a move. So she watched, and waited.

In the distance, coming down over a hill, she saw another rider. Another of the Dash W bunkhouse crew, she supposed, coming to get in on the kill. She

turned her attention again to those nearest.

In the bunkhouse, Jed saw the approaching fifth rider also, and called Duane's attention to him.

"That's Bill Casey comin' back," he said. "How come he's on that hillside, I don't know. Seems strange And it's strange he left Big Mike and came back to the ranch, too. He was all set for havin' a spree in town and buyin' himself new boots."

"We'll soon find out," Duane replied, grimly.

"I reckon. Casey may not like you much, Duane. Seemed a mite upset when Big Mike named you foreman here. Probably thought he should have the job. You don't suppose he'd throw in with Newt Binner and them Dash W renegades, do you?"

"A man never can tell," Duane replied. "I don't know Casey well enough to judge him."

In the house, Molly watched from the front window. One of the Dash W men was sneaking toward the bunkhouse, getting too near it to suit her. Sells was getting close to the corral, Binner kept to the lane, and the fourth man was circling to come up behind the big barn. It would be an easy thing, she knew, for that barn to be set afire, for ruin to strike at the Broken Wheel just at the moment when everything looked so good for the future.

Molly opened the door and went out upon the porch. Her voice rang: "Want to see somebody, Binner?"

All the Dash W men must have heard her call. She could see them all stop their ponies and look toward Binner as if for orders. Molly held her rifle ready, and waited.

"Howdy, Molly!" Binner called. "We were just wantin' to see Jack Duane about somethin'. But looks like he's still hidin' behind a woman and lettin' her do his talkin' and fightin' for him."

"He can do his own fighting, as you should know," she retorted.

"That remark won't do him any good," Binner threatened.

"I've been watching your men, Binner," Molly called. "You yell for them to come to you—right now! I want you all in one bunch. When I get you there, I'll give you half a minute to turn and ride. Jack Duane, our foreman, ordered you to stay off this ranch—remember?"

Duane's voice reached her suddenly from the bunkhouse:

"Get back into the house, Molly, and stay there! Keep out of the ruckus, if there's one! Do as I tell you this time!"

SHE jerked her head around and saw Duane in the bunkhouse door. At that instant, Rod Sells fired his side gun, and the bullet struck the bunkhouse not far from Duane and ricocheted with a nasty whine. The first shot had been fired.

Jed Moore fired a rifle through a bunkhouse window and his shot knocked Sells' hat off. Newt Binner jumped his pony behind a tree and from there behind the hedge. The two other Dash W men took cover, and Molly noticed with satisfaction that the one she had been watching had not been able to reach the barn.

She knelt beside the porch railing, searching for a target. Guns were cracking on every side of the place. Bullets struck the bunkhouse and glanced. Binner was yelling orders at his men.

Molly heard a bunkhouse window crash as a bullet shattered it. She saw Sells try to ride furiously around the corral to get at the bunkhouse. Duane stepped out of the bunkhouse door and fired his rifle, and Sells' saddle was emptied and the Dash W man sprawled in the dirt and a moment later started crawling toward cover beside the corral.

Binner and the other two men had dismounted and were trying to get to the bunkhouse, going from cover to cover. Molly got off the porch and went to the corner of the house, where she had a better view of the field of battle.

One of the Dash W men ran along a rough stretch of land near the bunk-

house and got behind a rock not more than twenty feet from it. Molly used her rifle and sent a bullet that plowed the ground in front of him and showered sand and gravel into his face. He darted to fresh cover.

Binner had got nearer the bunkhouse.

"Come out and fight, Duane!" he shouted. "I'll tell the other men to hold their fire. This thing—it's between you and me."

"Stay where you are, Jack!" Molly screeched. "Two others ready to plug you if you come out."

Jed Moore had opened up through the smashed bunkhouse window, yelling as he fired, an old-timer rejuvenated for a moment by the thrill of fighting. Molly saw the Dash W man she had showered with dirt get up and start running to a more advantageous position. And she snapped a shot that struck him and send him sprawling, and he did not move again.

Binner was still making for the bunkhouse. Sells had fired one shot from the corral, so could still be counted in the fighting. And the fourth Dash W man was under cover somewhere.

Hoofbeats sounded above the din of firing, and Molly jerked around to see Bill Casey riding furiously down the lane. She, too, wondered just where Casey stood in this. She had noticed his resentment when Big Mike had named Duane foreman.

Binner and the fourth Dash W man appeared then at the same instant, bending low and running toward the bunkhouse, trying to gain the protection of its walls. Molly fired and missed. Jed Moore could not get a bead on either of the men.

She saw Casey jump out of his saddle and run forward. He had not taken his side gun from its holster. He stopped beside a tree and watched.

"Get into it, Casey!" Molly yelled at him.

He did not seem to hear her. But he did draw his gun and stand ready.

"Throw in with us, Casey!" Binner yelled from behind a rock. "Want to work under this kid from Colorado? There's a job waitin' for you at the Dash W—where you can work with men on a prosperous ranch."

The fourth Dash W man ran from cover. Jed Moore had been waiting for that. The old-timer pumped shots through the broken window and sent the Dash W man sprawling.

Sells had not fired again, but Molly winged a bullet in the direction of his hiding place to keep him settled if he was not dead or unconscious.

Newt Binner remained unhurt. And now he darted forward and got behind a tree. Molly could not reach him with a shot there. She glanced at Casey, who remained motionless.

Duane came running from the bunkhouse, bent almost double, his side gun held ready. Binner sent a bullet past him almost near enough to scorch his shoulder. Binner gave a wild yell of rage and came out into the open.

HIS gun and Duane's began blazing as they stood within thirty feet of each other. Molly saw Duane wheel half way around, and guessed the action had been caused by a bullet's shock. She saw Duane lurch toward the other man, his gun still blazing. And then she saw Newt Binner drop his weapon, reel to one side, clutch at his breast, and pitch forward on his face.

Another gun began cracking. Molly turned quickly to see Casey firing at the corner of the corral.

"Sells was playin' possum," Casey called. "He's a dead possum now."

"Thanks, Casey!" Duane called. Then he, too, pitched forward.

Molly began running toward him, tossing her rifle aside. Jed Moore came out of the bunkhouse with the blaze of battle still in his eyes. Casey ran toward the scene, too.

"They're all down," Jed yelled. "Better check 'em, Casey. Might be more possum-players. And there! Look!"

Even as she ran on toward Duane, Molly glanced where he pointed. She saw a big white gelding racing into the end of the lane. On the gelding's back, Henry Wellton was waving an arm and shouting something she could not understand. And behind him were a dozen Dash W men.

So this would be the end, Molly thought. Wellton was here with more of his crew to wipe the Broken Wheel off the map. But she ran on, for her foremost thought was of Duane.

As she knelt beside him, she heard Henry Wellton shouting:

"Got word of this after Binner and the others left the ranch. Got some of my decent men and came ridin'. I don't stand for this kind of thing. Big Mike was right—I'll clean out my bunkhouse and we'll have peace hereabouts. There's plenty of room for our two outfits."

"Jack, Jack," Molly was sobbing.

"It's—shoulder wound," he told her. "Just—knocked me flat for a minute. And you! I told you to stay out of it."

"I always fight the Broken Wheel's battles. Oh, Jack, we always seem to be fighting, too. Why do we do that?"

"Could be the Irish in you," he said. His voice was low, but he grinned. "Might be a good idea, if we like each other enough when we get better acquainted, to hook up and always fight side by side—at each other and against other folks. It'd make life—right interestin'."

"Jack!" she whispered; and bent and kissed him.

She heard Casey saying that he'd seen a skulker on the way to town and was afraid of a sneak attack, and had told Big Mike about forgetting something at the ranch, and so had returned to be on hand in case of trouble.

And she realized dimly that Mike Murphy had arrived on old Seth Jackson's mount, Wellton having sent a rider toward town to overhaul and warn him, and that he and Wellton were acting like friends.

She heard Casey reporting that Binner and Sells were dead and the other two Dash W men alive but in bad condition.

But those things were secondary with Molly Murphy just then. She was holding Duane's hand and kissing him repeatedly and without shame, and calling at intervals for somebody to carry him into the house so she could start playing nurse.

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Shackle Shadows

by
CLIFF WALTERS

Jail put a layer of ice on Tom Burdette's heart—and only a girl's tear-filled eyes could melt it!

OF THE FORTY CONVICTS who had started clearing out brush and jackpines for the new wagon road through Campfire Pass, there were two who were stonily silent. Steep ramparts of limerock cradled that defile in the Buckhorn Mountains. One of the men was young Tom Burdette, six-one, dark, endowed with the sinewy strength of a black panther. The other was "Scar" Shasteen, a slim, gray-maned man of sixty-five. An old bullet scar that seared deep along his left jaw, gave him the nickname.

These two bunked together and sat side by side in the long mess tent.

They worked side by side with ax, pick or crowbar, yet seldom exchanged a word. Stocky Barth McCrail, boss of the camp, had once said to a guard, "A pair of sphinxes, them two. Young Burdette dreadin' the years ahead of him. And Shasteen smoulderin' because the owl-hoot finally led him into a stone corral."

"I wonder if young Burdette belongs here?" the guard had said slowly. "If he didn't get a raw deal, he sure acts like it—and enough to make me half believe it."

"He's here, ain't he?" McCrail had said bluntly. "Yeah, and swingin' enough pick for two men, because him and the old killer he herds with don't believe in blowin' off steam with their mouths."

Tom and Scar were working together this morning, felling brush and small trees and throwing them into the deep, rocky pocket, just below the proposed road. A roaring fire burned there, with crackling fury all day long. Sweat glistened on the younger man's lean, tanned face as he toiled. He paused less in his work than did his stoical, hard-bitten companion. It was only to glance, with hungry dark eyes, at the free hills lying beyond the gap of the canyon's stony mouth.

The two men were trying to drag a sizeable jackpine toward the fire pit when the guard ordered another pair of workers to give them a lift on it. The butt of the tree was finally poised on the rocky embankment. The two men behind lifted the lighter end and gave a shove.

Tom and old Scar started to jump free of the moving pine, but old Scar's denim jumper had become hooked to a small, sharp stub of limb and he plunged downward with the falling tree.

The guard yelled. Tom Burdette leaped over the stony embankment and seized his tumbling companion by the feet. His big hands clamped like vises, the roaring flames leaping at him, singeing his brows and lashes. Tom Burdette yanked Scar Shasteen up and back. Hands reached down and grabbed the man Tom was lifting, a twisting, fire-tortured man. Then they were dragging Tom out of the rocky inferno, and leading the smoke-blinded rescuer into a tent.

"That was game of you, Burdette," said McCrail, the boss. "Another few seconds and Scar Shasteen—"

"How's Scar?" Tom asked.

"Cooked pretty bad, but you got him out in time."

"If he busts me over the head with a crowbar, I won't blame him."

"What do you mean by that?" McCrail demanded.

"I mean they don't keep dead men shackled," Tom Burdette said coldly, grimly. He added, "Even them that have done something to be shackled for."

A guard galloped by the tent on a bay horse. He was heading for the nearest town, Agateville, to get the doctor for Scar Shasteen. Through stinging, lashless eyes, Tom Burdette watched the horseman gallop down the trail and out onto the hills below the canyon's mouth. Envy smoldered within the prisoner. He wished he were out on those hills, and with a good mount under him.

IT WAS midafternoon when Tom Burdette, back at work by his own choice, saw Doc Lockhart's gray team pulling into the convict camp. There were two men on the seat of the buckboard.

A few minutes later the camp boss, McCrail, came riding up to the work gang. He stopped his horse in front of Tom and said, "You're wanted at the office tent. John Venable, the warden, arrived in Agateville. He rode out with Doc Lockhart, and wants to see you."

"To pin a medal on him, for savin' old Scar Shasteen's bacon?" piped up a half-witted horse thief called Windy Orcutt. "Put in a good word for me, Burdette. And tell Venable the grub in this camp ain't what it might be."

"Shut up!" McCrail snapped at the speaker. Then, turning to Tom, he ordered curtly, "Come on! Start walkin'!"

Venable, a big man with eyes the color of steel bars, looked at the prisoner

entering the office tent. "Hello, Burdette," the warden said. "They tell me you made a hero of yourself today?"

"Did they?" Tom's dark eyes were cool, his voice flat.

"I've got good news for you."

"A tin medal?"

"Better than that. You're being released."

Tom Burdette's tall frame stiffened as if a bullet had gone through him.

Venable went on, "It seems that you didn't kill an enemy named Hugh Dorn, in the fist fight you had with him. It seems that a gent named Howard Galt came by your homestead and found Dorn lying where you'd knocked him out. Galt finished him off because he and Dorn were smitten by the same dancehall queen, a redhead they call Natalie. It was Natalie that finally tipped things off to your sheriff over in Big Sandy County. Which is the reason you're now a free man and that Howard Galt is now in the penitentiary."

"What about Galt's brother, Warren?" Tom asked. "It was him, lyin' when he was under oath, that helped send me here? Lyin' as fast as he auctioneers when he's workin' at a sale!"

"I don't know anything about him," Venable answered. "The main thing is, you're free now. Justice went astray. But, after two years, the guilty is jailed and the innocent goes free. I brought your two hundred dollars up from the prison safe, and the papers for your release."

"And that squares things all up, eh?" Tom asked bitingly. "Has the law, that sent me here, arranged to have two years tacked onto my life? Or to give me back the homestead I was within a month of provin' up on? Or give me back the horses and cattle it cost me to hire a lawyer that wasn't smart enough to keep me from bein' railroaded?"

"Sorry, Burdette. I'm just a warden."

"And I've been a goat—led around with a pair of handcuffs that I never deserved. Next time it'll be different. Maybe I'll deserve 'em, but I'd hate to be the man that tries to put 'em on."

"You have a right to be bitter, but don't let it run away with you," the warden advised paternally. "You might be coming back again. And to stay—like the old wolf you dragged out of that fire pit this morning."

Rancor in his heart, a challenge in his dark eyes, Tom Burdette countered. "Would you like to bet two hundred dollars against mine that I'll ever be swingin' a pick for the state again?"

McCrail came to the door. "Scar Shasteen wants to see you," he said. "He wants to thank you for savin' his scalp—before you leave, Burdette. You can ride back to town with Mr. Venable and the doc."

Tom was soon admitted to the tent where lay the bandage-swathed ex-outlaw, Scar Shasteen. Doc Lockhart withdrew for a smoke as Tom walked over to the bunk.

"How you feelin', Scar?" Tom asked.

"Glad, on your account," came the reply. "And mighty grateful to you, boy, for keepin' me from roastin' in the fires of Gehenna before I died." In a lower voice, he added, "Are we alone?"

"Yeah."

"Lean down here and listen—hard!"

JUST a little more than a week later, Tom Burdette, a gun on his hip and a wiry roan horse under him, rode into the Skull Badlands, the most remote and desolate part of the state. It was a big, wild country, populated only by little bands of unbranded mustangs grazing on the salt sage that grew in the swales. It was a country that seemed deathly silent to a man accustomed to the noise and movement of a convict road camp.

Toward the heart of those badlands Tom Burdette rode, and on the tough, half-spoiled horse that no longer bucked with him. The roan, bucking often and viciously at first, had never been able to throw this tall, enduring man as he had the others. He had met his master—one who had shunned as much as

possible the cowtowns along the way.

It was high noon when Tom reached the heart of those badlands. It was sundown before he swung from his saddle below a bulging ledge of sandrock. He walked to the north end of that natural shelter, his new boots sinking to the ankles in the carpet of loose sand. He dropped to his knees, began to paw at that loose sand; while the roan horse watched with ears pricked forward.

Strong hands working methodically, Tom had pawed over a halfdozen square yards before he unearthed a streak of black—the powdered remnants of an old campfire. Now his hands worked faster. Moisture was dripping from his brow when he suddenly came up with an old tomato can, the ragged-cut top of which had been sealed down with a lump of clay burned to cementlike hardness.

Tom broke that crude seal by hitting the can against the rock wall. He twisted the tin top and started counting currency. There was six thousand dollars of it, as Scar Shasteen had declared when he had whispered, and while Tom had listened hard.

"I'll never get my burned hands on it again," old Scar had said. "Never pack it down to Argentina in a money belt, like I had planned—'fore they caught up with me. Take it. Go high, wide and handsome on it and try to forget these two years a fooled judge and jury whittled off your life! And don't worry about where it come from. I didn't take it off a dead man."

Tom was curious about where that money had come from, but, as old Scar had suggested, he wasn't going to worry about it. He didn't owe the law anything. It was the other way around.

Dusk was turning to dark. There was a sound of hoofs, and the roan horse pivoted around on his front feet to watch the rim of the low ridge across the badland swale. Tom Burdette's hand dropped to the butt of his gun. His dark eyes narrowed warily, defiantly. He was ready for any emergency, ready to protect an inheritance bequeathed by an old wolf who would never again ride the hills of freedom.

The hoofbeats came closer, but no riders appeared. It was only two mustang mares and colts galloping toward the waterhole, a little pond of brackish water, farther down the swale. But when they sighted the man and saddled horse, they trumpeted loud snorts and high-tailed it away. A steady hand released a gun-butt. Darkness settled over the vast, silent land.

Later, a tall man lay on a bed of sand and looked at the stars. Maybe Argentina, reputed to be a great range country, would be as good a place as any for one who knew livestock, one who had made his living in the saddle until he had homesteaded in Frying Pan Basin.

Tom thought of that homestead he had lost, along with his freedom. He thought of the posts and poles and logs he had hauled, of the long hours and months he had drudged. Then that battle of fists with his thieving neighbor, Hugh Dorn.

Then had come the trial at Driftwood. The Galt brothers, Howard and Warren, big, red-faced, sandy-haired men, lying at the trial. And to protect Howard who had been Dorn's rival for the affections of a dance hall girl named Natalie, Warren Galt, the glib young auctioneer, swearing that Howard had been with him at the time of Dorn's murder. And a gullible jury mistaking Tom's truthful statements for lies. The judge meting out a sentence of ten years for manslaugher. Then stone walls and steel bars and an innocent man sweating out the long hours in a convict road camp.

Tom's fists clenched. He wished he could have come face to face with the prisoner now taking his place, or could meet Warren Galt who had left the Frying Pan Basin range, probably to escape a perjury charge.

AT DAYLIGHT Tom was in the saddle and riding west across the badlands. He had had no supper or breakfast, and

the roan horse hadn't fared much better on very slim pickings.

It was an hour past noon when the rider entered a little cowtown called Burnt Rock, lying between the badlands and the Moose Horn Mountains, a low, timbered spur of the Rockies. Tom stabled his horse and headed for the only cafe. He was eating roast beef, tough but welcome, when the only other customer in the place, a short, fat man, said to the lank proprietor:

"I see by your weekly paper here that some locoed convict made the mistake of savin' old Scar Shasteen from the fiery pit."

"Yeah," growled the slender proprietor. "And they should've give the locoed gent life for makin' such a mistake, instead of turnin' him loose. If that 'hero' was to show up on this range, old Bob Banion'd probably take a shot at him. Nor you couldn't blame him much."

"Wonder how old Bob's auction sale'll come out tomorrow?" gossiped the fat man, never guessing that the lithe, dark stranger sitting at the counter had the slightest interest in what he was saying. "If he comes out with enough cash left over to leave the country on, he'll be lucky."

"He might do pretty good," the lank man answered. "They say this new auctioneer's a good one."

"You don't reckon he could be any kin of this Galt that they sent to the pen, do you?"

The lank man grinned. "I'd hate to ask him such a question," he said. "Not so long as he's as big and rugged-lookin' as he is."

"Me too," said the fat man. "Well, see you later, Hank."

Tom went from the cafe over to the barber shop. He wanted to let his horse rest and eat, and he needed a shave and a haircut. When the barber had finished, Tom casually asked, "Just where's the auction sale they're havin' tomorrow?"

"Six miles north of here. The Banion place in Antelope Valley. You figgerin' on buyin' some ranch stuff?"

"A pack horse, maybe," Tom answered. "Is this auctioneer—Galt, I believe his name is—in town?"

"He's out at the Banion place, gettin' the stuff lined up." The elderly barber chuckled. "He's takin' his time, too. Yep, Martha Banion's a right nice-lookin' girl."

It was sundown when Tom rode up to the buildings of a pretty little ranch in Antelope Valley. The rider stopped, looked over a half-dozen horses in the corral, then rode on to the barn in front of which a small, elderly man was oiling a harness.

"Howdy!" greeted the older man. "Come to look over some of my stuff 'fore it goes on sale tomorrow mornin'?"

"You're Bob Banion?"

"I am."

Tom looked around for a moment. "Don't you kinda hate to leave a place as pretty as this little outfit?" he asked.

"It ain't my choosin'," was the reply. "But when you're flat against a wall—and because an outlaw coyote, achin' to pull the trigger on his gun, took most of your money away from you—"

"Are you referrin' to Scar Shasteen?"

"That's the buzzard! You've heard about him?"

BEHIND him, Tom heard the screen door on the ranchhouse slam. He heard voices coming toward him, the voice of a girl and that of a man who spoke fluently in deep, soothing tones. "Are the customers arriving already, Dad?" called the girl.

Still Tom Burdette didn't twist around in his saddle. He sat, leaning over big hands crossed atop the saddle-horn, and waited.

"It's a bad sign, Bob!" called brawny, red-faced Warren Galt. "Havin' a gun-wearin customer showin' up—and where a lot of money's goin' to be changin' hands!"

"Stop joking, Warren!" Martha Banion answered. "Why don't you invite the visitor in, Dad? There's still some supper left."

Tom Burdette moved like a lean panther as he slid off his horse and turned to face the young couple. He saw a slim girl with a nice chin and clear blue eyes. He saw Warren Galt standing as still as a statue.

"What's wrong?" an excited girl finally blurted. "Warren! Do you know this stranger?"

"He does," Tom answered, his voice like a knife. "And the only thing wrong is that Galt hasn't got a gun. Maybe you'd better get him one. He's goin' to need it!"

"Now, hold on, Burdette!" Galt said, in a quavering tone.

"Burdette?" echoed old Bob Banion. "The coyote that saved old Scar Shasteen's scalp in that convict camp?"

"The same," said Tom, but he didn't take his eyes off Warren Galt. "Maybe you and your beautiful daughter don't think much of old Scar, but whatever he is or was—he's worth a dozen like this overgrown vulture here who sends an innocent man to prison and who jabbers like a magpie at auction sales!"

"I don't believe it!" cried Martha Banion, her face tense.

"Then I'll tell you about it—and see if Galt has nerve enough to deny it. I'll tell you about him, and his coyote brother. Not to mention a dancehall girl named Natalie. I'll tell you about—"

Warren Galt had been twitching. Now he leaped to stem those ringing words. Leaped and threw a right swing that would have felled Tom Burdette if he hadn't had the agility of a panther. But that blow missed the dark man's tight-clamped jaw, while his own right hand —one that had been wielding picks and crowbars in a convict road camp—shot upward like a rocket and crushed Galt's nose under its impact.

Blood spurted. A girl screamed as Tom's jolting left hand cracked to Galt's face. Then Galt hit Tom to the body, and again to the face. But the agile, deadly antagonist rode those punches and smashed a savage right to Galt's mouth.

"Stop them, Dad!" cried the agitated girl.

"Don't try it!" Tom answered. "The only way you or Galt can stop me now is to kill me!"

"I will kill you!" Galt bellowed, wild-eyed and dripping blood.

Galt tried valiantly to make good his threat. Time after time he flung himself upon the lighter, slimmer man, only to be beaten back with swift, merciless blows to face and body. Tom took punishment, savage enough to defeat less sturdy a man. But he dealt it out still more savagely. He kept smashing at Galt's battered face until the heavier man was reeling and gasping for breath.

At last Galt was tottering, swearing and sobbing. Then Tom uncorked an uppercut and Galt, lifted by the force of it, thudded limply to the ground and lay there.

"Gosh!" blurted old Bob Banion in an awed tone. "I've seen fist fights before, but never—" He blinked at the grim, tight-lipped victor.

"It was hideous!" said Martha Banion, shuddering.

"So was the time I spent in the pen, because one of the Galts was a murderer and the other one there a liar," Tom replied.

"Tell us about it, Burdette!" old Banion said.

"Yes, do," said his daughter.

Tom told his story tersely. When he had finished, he added, "How much money did Scar Shasteen take away from you, Banion?"

"Nearly seven thousand dollars," replied the older man bitterly. "If we had that, Martha and me wouldn't be sellin' out here—losin' out after all the hard work we've done tryin' to hang on."

"Never mind, Dad," said the girl with the light brown hair and deep blue eyes. "We'll get a start somewhere. I'm young, and not afraid to work. We've had a jolt, but not as hard a one as Tom Burdette here." She looked at the victor of a hard-won battle and added, "Won't you let me go in the house and warm up some

supper for you?"

"No thanks," he said, and turned toward his horse.

The girl looked at Warren Galt. "I'll get a towel and some water," she said and then walked toward the house.

TOM watched her until the old screen door closed behind her. Then he glanced across the dusky meadowland, and at the rising sweep of the mountains in the background. Antelope Valley. He would never forget this spot, nor the blue of a girl's eyes nor the conflict that was now raging behind his mask of casualness. He had better mount his horse and be on his way, he told himself.

Suddenly he reached in his saddle-pocket and took out six thousand dollars in currency. He proffered the money to gaping old Bob Banion. "Here!" he said gruffly. "It's your money, I guess. Loot that Scar Shasteen told me where to find."

"Scar?" Banion's mouth flopped open.

Suddenly angry with himself, Tom Burdette tossed the money at the worn-out boots of old Bob Banion. Then the young man straddled his roan and headed toward the mountains. He wouldn't be sailing for Argentina now. He would be taking a job, buckling down to work. "It's their money!" he growled at himself.

He rounded a little promontory and started up a dusk-filled swale. Then, hand on his gun, he hipped around quickly in his saddle. A rider was racing after him, a slim rider whose light brown hair was whipped by the evening breeze.

"Tom Burdette!" she cried, and there was a sob in her voice. He pulled up his roan, waited until Martha Banion approached. Tears shone on the lashes of deep blue eyes.

"You're not just handing us six thousand dollars and riding on!" the girl said. "We'd never have seen a penny of that money if it hadn't been for you, or if you hadn't been one of the squarest shooters that ever lived!"

"I've been tellin' myself that maybe I wouldn't've been so noble if I'd—" He stopped.

"And I've been tellin' myself as I rode along to overtake you that jail bars can't make bad men good, or good men bad," she answered, a tremor in her voice. "And I'd still be thankful to know the last part was true, even if you'd never handed Dad his money! But it isn't all our money now, Dad's and mine. It's partly yours. Come on back and let Dad talk to you. He told me to make you. And I want you to."

"You think Galt'll be gone by the time we get there?" Tom Burdette asked, and on his dark face was the hint of something that hadn't been there for a long time—a smile.

"You bet he'll be gone. Dad's seeing to that! Anyhow, now we don't need any auctioneers. We're going to hang onto our little ranch, our home. And when I say 'ours' I mean yours, too, Tom Burdette!"

Pleading blue eyes seemed to melt the ice that had been forming about a young man's heart during these past two years. "Maybe I will go back and eat some warmed-up supper, Martha Banion," he said as he reined his horse around.

FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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Love Rides a Strange Trail

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MASTERFUL MAN

By

Ruth Anderson

Sue Mason can't make up her mind between Bill Ware and Jeff Carter —so she lets her heart decide!

"I've made a mistake," Sue told Bill Ware

IT WAS one of the most elaborate dances that had ever been given in Mesquite Valley, for the big Triangle outfit had made it a real event. Sue Mason felt very proud of all that her mother and father had accomplished, and she had also done her share of the work.

"This is really something, Sue," Bill Ware said as he stood leaning against the fence that had been built around the outdoor dance floor. "I've never seen anything quite like it."

Couples thronged the dance floor, the men and girls dressed in colorful cow country outfits. Chinese lanterns hung on wires that had been stretched from one big tree to another. It was late afternoon now and still light, but the dance was expected to last until eleven at night with a supper for everyone at six.

An orchestra imported all the way from Chicago played lilting dance tunes, and everyone in the valley had been invited, so practically all of them were there. John Mason was the richest man in the valley and the Triangle the biggest ranch there, so when he gave a dance he had spared no expense.

Yet as she stood beside big, good looking Bill Ware with the dancers having a gay time on the other side of the fence, Sue realized she had made a mistake. All of the girls were wearing cowgirl outfits even to their big hats and Sue was dressed in a pretty short sleeved dancing frock.

"So the Princess decided not to dress like the peasants," Bill said. He wore a cowboy outfit, and there was a gun in the holster hanging at his right hip. He held his gray Stetson in his hand. "Reckon you just couldn't forget the Masons rule the roost around here."

"I—I didn't think," Sue said weakly, hating herself for trying to explain. "I'll change into my cowgirl clothes later."

The late afternoon sunlight gleamed down on her blonde hair that she wore

shoulder length. She liked Bill Ware—in fact there were times when she wondered if she wasn't in love with him—but he was always difficult in his present mood.

HE OWNED a small spread at the north end of the valley, and was doing fairly well, but recently Sue had discovered an apparently swiftly growing resentment upon his part over the fact that her family happened to be rich.

Sue knew that her father could have told Bill of the struggle that John Mason had getting started here in the valley over thirty years ago. It had not been until the Triangle had been established for ten years that John Mason had married Nancy Blake and brought home his bride.

The next year Sue Mason had been born, and had grown up an only child. She had been sent East to school when she was old enough after graduating from the little red school house in the valley. She had seen the Triangle gradually grow into the big ranch it was now. Her father was a good business man and he knew cattle.

The other ranchers on the Mesquite range liked John Mason and considered him one of them at all times, but Bill Ware was new in the valley. He didn't know the story behind the building of the Triangle into the big ranch that it was now.

Sometimes Sue wondered if there wasn't a touch of plain envy of another man's success in Bill's attitude. Sometimes, when he called her "Princess" as he had just done, there was almost a sneer in the way he said it.

She turned and glanced over the fence at the dancers. Her eyes brightened as she saw Jeff Carter dancing with Nellie Lanceford. Jeff owned a small ranch at the south end of the valley, a ranch that he had inherited when his uncle had died three years ago.

Jeff was a strong faced, dark haired man in his early thirties who had been a tophand before he started in as a rancher. He had no time to envy the owner of a larger spread, and Sue admitted ruefully apparently also very little time to be interested in the daughter of the owner of the Triangle.

"Would you like to dance, Sue?" Bill asked, in the tone of one who thought he really should be polite to his hostess.

"Not right now," Sue said. "You made me realize that I would be a bit too conspicious on the floor in this dress."

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "I didn't mean to do that." He looked worried. "There's something I've got to talk to you about, Sue. Is there some place where we could go to be alone for a little while?"

"There doesn't seem to be anyone around in back of the ranchhouse," Sue said. "We might walk back there now."

They walked around to the rear of the big ranchhouse. There was no one there. Bill stopped and stood staring down at her intently.

"Seems like I had better tell you why I have been acting kind of hard to get along with," Bill said. "It is just because I'm plumb crazy about you, Sue, and I know that I don't stand a chance. Your father would never consent to you marrying the owner of a little two-bit spread like I am—I'm sure of that."

"I'm certain—" Sue began.

"Of course you're certain that I don't have a chance," Bill interrupted before she could finish what she was going to say. "I know that as I said before. You don't need to tell me."

Sue had been about to say that she was certain that when it came to deciding who she would marry, her father would let her make up her own mind and do as her heart dictated. But Bill seemed so fully determined to make the idea of her marrying him a hopeless proposition that she remained silent.

She was used to men who fought for what they wanted, no matter if it was establishing a ranch or winning the heart of the girl they loved. Because of this she found Bill Ware's defeatist attitude more annoying than appealing.

"I can tell by your silence that I'm right, Sue," Bill said, moving closer to her. "But at least I'll have this to remember."

Swiftly he reached out and took her in his arms, then kissed her squarely on the lips. She didn't struggle, or make the slightest attempt to get away. It was the first time since she had known Bill that he had ever kissed her. It was a nice, rather sweet kiss, but to her surprise she didn't find it particularly exciting.

"I'll remember that always," Bill said as he released her.

AS HE stepped away from her slowly, Sue glanced toward the ranchhouse. She gasped as she saw Jeff Carter leaning against the side of the house watching them. Bill caught the direction of her gaze and scowled as he saw Jeff.

"Something special on your mind, Carter?" Bill demanded angrily as Jeff strolled toward them. "Or do you make a habit of going around spying on people."

"Sue promised me the next dance," Jeff said calmly. "I remembered seeing you two walk back here so I came back to see about the dance." He smiled. "Didn't aim to spy on anyone."

Bill gave an angry snort and walked away. Sue stood watching until he disappeared around the corner of the ranchhouse, then she glanced at Jeff.

"Kiss a girl and walk away, and you won't get a chance another day," Jeff said with a smile. "Which isn't very good poetry, but sure makes plenty of sense."

Sue heard the music and realized another dance had started so she headed back toward the dance floor with Jeff walking beside her.

"Jeff, if you were in love with a girl would you believe that you just didn't have a chance with her?" Sue asked.

"Not unless the girl told me so herself," Jeff said thoughtfully. "Happens that I am in love, but the girl is plumb crazy about somebody else."

Sue remembered the way Jeff had been looking down at her as he had been dancing with Nellie Lanceford just a little while ago. Nellie was the pretty red-headed daughter of the owner of the hotel in the cowtown southeast of the Triangle, and one of the most popular girls in the valley.

Nellie and Sue were good friends, and Sue knew that the redhead was very much interested in young Bob Tyler, who owned the general store in Latigo. If Jeff had fallen in love with Nellie, Sue knew he didn't really have a chance.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," Sue said as they stepped onto the dance floor and started to waltz. "But I'm afraid you picked the wrong girl to fall in love with."

"Seems so," Jeff said quietly.

He danced beautifully and Sue was enjoying every moment of the waltz. All around her the guests of the Triangle were smiling and nodding to her, and some of them voicing greetings as they danced near.

No one seemed to be paying the slightest attention to the fact that her dress was different from the cowgirl costumes of the other girls.

She saw no sign of Bill Ware among the dancers or the onlookers and wondered where he had gone. As the dance ended she saw her father standing talking earnestly to old Sheriff Hank Parks, and there was a serious expression on the face of both men.

"Your dad and the sheriff look worried,' Jeff said. "Maybe we better see what it is all about."

"You're right," Sue said. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to spoil the dance when everyone seems to be having such a good time."

She walked over to where John Mason stood with the sheriff and Jeff followed close behind her. "Anything wrong, Dad?" she asked.

Mason glanced at the old lawman before he spoke.

"Might as well tell them, John," Parks said. "Reckon they can be trusted not to spread the news around. Doing that

would sure put a damper on the festivities."

"What happened, Dad?" Sue demanded anxiously.

"I've been robbed," Mason said. "Somebody here at the dance stole five thousand dollars in cash from a drawer of the desk in my office in the ranchhouse." He scowled. "And I thought all of the folks in the valley could be trusted!"

"Most all of them can be," said the sheriff. "Been a long time since we've had any rustling, or holdups around here. I've managed to keep owlhoots pretty well out of the valley. Aim to get the hombre who stole that money, too."

"I hate to say this," Jeff said as he stood listening. "But I saw a man coming out of the ranchhouse about half an hour ago and I wondered what he was doing in there."

"Who was it?" Sheriff Parks asked.

"Bill Ware," Jeff said.

"Oh, no!" Sue exclaimed before the other men could speak. "Bill just can't be a thief! I refuse to believe it."

"I didn't say he was," Jeff said. "I just said I saw him coming out of the ranchhouse. Probably he can explain that if you question him, Sheriff."

Sue was staring at Jeff, and she caught a gleam in his eyes that she didn't like. It dawned on her that here was a man who might be completely ruthless in getting what he wanted. She found that she didn't consider him half as attractive as she had thought just a little while ago. Besides he was at least ten years older than she was, and sometimes that matters a lot when you are only twenty-two.

The three men and the girl moved away from the dance floor and headed toward the ranchhouse. As they did so Sue saw Bill Ware ride around the house on his roan. All of the guests had arrived on horseback or in light wagons and the teams and saddle horses were kept down near the cavvy corral.

"There's Ware now," Jeff said. "And he is getting away."

"I wouldn't say that," the sheriff said mildly. "He might just be leaving." Parks raised his voice. "Come here a minute, Bill. Want to talk to you."

BILL heard him and rode over to them and swung out of the saddle. He stood there holding the reins of the roan.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"You're in trouble up to your neck, Ware," Jeff said coldly. "Mr. Mason has discovered you took that five thousand dollars in cash that he had in the lower right-hand drawer of his desk."

"The money is missing, Bill," Mason said. "And Carter saw you coming out of the ranchhouse half an hour ago."

"He stole the money," Jeff said. "I'm betting you'll find the cash in that pocket of his saddle."

The sheriff stepped to the roan, opened the saddle pocket and drew out five thousand-dollar bills.

"I—I didn't even know the money was there," Bill said.

"Of course you didn't, Bill," Sue said quickly. "But Jeff knew where the money would be found—just as he knew it had been taken from the lower right-hand drawer of Dad's desk."

"That's right," said Mason. "I didn't even tell the sheriff what drawer the money was in. Only the man who stole it could have known that."

"Jeff said he saw Bill coming out of the house half an hour ago," Sue said. "That is impossible. Up until the time that I danced with Jeff just a little while ago Bill has been with me all of the time for the past hour or so."

"So you tried to frame me, Carter," Bill said glaring at Jeff. "I can only think of one reason for you doing it. You must have figured that you didn't stand a chance with Sue while I was around so you were trying to get me out of the way."

"He told me he was in love, but the girl was crazy about someone else," Sue said. "I thought he meant he was in love with Nellie Lanceford—but he

must have meant me."

"Looks like I made a mistake," Jeff said sullenly.

"You made a bad one," said the sheriff, looking at Mason. "Shall I place him under arrest, John?"

"Never mind, Sheriff," said Mason. "I've got the money back, so we won't say anything about this." He glared at Jeff. "But you're leaving, and I'm warning you to keep off Triangle range from now on, Carter."

JEFF turned away, and headed around the ranchhouse to get his horse. The sheriff and Mason smiled at Bill and Sue and walked toward the porch of the ranchhouse.

"I've learned that a man shouldn't be too sure of things until he asks a girl about them," Bill said. "There are too many folks around here for me to do the asking now, Sue. So how about going riding with me tomorrow morning?"

"Why of course, Bill!" Sue said.

The next morning she rode out with Bill onto a hill overlooking the ranch. They left their horses ground-hitched and lolled on the grass.

"In five more years I figure on building my ranch us so that it is also as big a spread as the Triangle," Bill said determinedly. "I want your father to be proud of his son-in-law after we're married."

"Oh, we're getting married then," Sue said.

"Of course." Bill moved over and rested his head in her lap as she sat on the grass and he sprawled out beside her. He was chewing on a bit of long grass. "Didn't you know?"

"I'm beginning to suspect it," Sue said, smiling down at him as she ran her fingers through his hair. "But there is such a thing as proposing to a girl, you know."

"So I've heard," said Bill. "Will you marry me, darling?"

"Yes, Bill," Sue said meekly, just as if she hadn't made up her mind to do just that ever since she had discovered how Jeff had tried to frame him. "How could I possibly say no when you are so masterful!"

TRUST YOUR DREAM

(Concluded from page 89)

and put them in his pocket. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he looked from Jerry to Mary Lou with a genial smile. "You two ride on over. I reckon this young lady can do some explaining on the way. We'll explore a bit with the car, and meet you at your place in an hour."

It was a wonderful hour. And judging from the frequency of the stops, when the two riders seemed to merge into one, the explanations were completely satisfactory.

"Only," Mary Lou mourned, "I didn't really pull it off. You'd have turned up at Pike's anyway, while Mr. Taylor was there."

"Lots of good that would have done me, if you hadn't got there first with your story." Jerry gave a sudden laugh. "Say, you know who really gets the credit? Miss Hannah. If she hadn't listened in—" He shook his head. "It sure is a cock-eyed world."

"But a nice one," Mary Lou whispered.

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Hombre of Her Heart

As she sees vast hordes of sheep invading the cattle range, Jean Linden wonders, with fear, whether the man she loves has betrayed her!

CHAPTER I

The Trail to Trouble

JEAN LINDEN felt as though old John Deering had slapped her across the face, there in front of everybody on the sun-baked little street.

Angry color raced into her cheeks and her grey eyes darkened to the tint of a stormy sky. She lifted her head so that the sunlight flashed against the rich fire of her hair as she said:

"I guess I didn't understand, Mr. Deering!"

But the old man's voice drowned hers. "Owning a bank doesn't mean being a charitable organization. Besides, I wouldn't lend a dollar on any outfit in this district now that Bill Farley's moved in."

Jean's glance met his levelly. "I'm sorry. I thought you were my father's friend. I don't see what this man Bill Farley has to do with the Two Roses, anyway."

"You don't!" Deering leaned toward her, his voice almost shrill. "Then you don't know much. Farley's just bought out the Bar Y Bar. Wait until you see what happens to this range now! He'll do what he's done in Montana—take what he wants if he has to scare everybody else out. He's a tough hombre and he'll run this district or there'll be trouble.

"I'm not interested in him. I was talking about a loan on the Two Roses. I need it to carry the ranch through the winter. When my father was alive—"

"Just because I'm friendly with people doesn't mean I'm going to let them beg me out of—"

"Wait a minute!" a voice said quietly, breaking into the banker's snarl.

A brown hand fell on Deering's arm and whirled him around.

"Go easy with that kind of talk, especially when you're speaking to a lady," the quiet voice said.

John Deering's thin body snapped erect and he stared up at the man towering above him. Jean Linden stared at him, too, with wide, startled eyes.

"Let me go!" Deering commanded.

"Sure. I can't do anything else. But if it wasn't for your age I'd give you a lesson in manners."

The man released the banker's arm and faced the girl, pulling off his rakishly angled Stetson.

"Anything I can do, ma'am?" he said gently.

THE girl noticed the slimness of his waist, above the crossed cartridge belt and the wide flat lines of this tall body. His dark clothes were dusty but his fair hair had a crisp, clean glint to

a novelet by

MARIAN O'HEARN

They swung out of their saddles and stood with their horses ground-hitched

Copyrighter 1938, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in April, 1938, Thrilling Ranch Stories

it. There was the same look of cleanness on his tanned face.

Then Jean's glance met his and she felt a faint sense of shock. His eyes should have been blue, but they were amber. Odd, lazy eyes, patterned by shadows.

"No thanks. We—we were having a business discussion," she said.

"And it's not finished yet!" John Deering thrust himself between them. "You probably think you're a tough hombre," he blustered. "Maybe you even came in with Bill Farley. Well, remember—I've handled tougher hombres."

"Help yourself." The lazy, amber eyes looked down at the banker. "Seems to me it's about time for you to quit crowing. Kind of hard on the blood pressure."

Old Deering started as though he would hurl himself at the stranger. Then he turned hastily toward the doors of the bank.

"Nice old coot," the man drawled, looking after him.

"Yes—" Jean hesitated and then went on, stiffly: "Thanks again and—good-by. My pony's right here."

"Now, that's funny." He grinned. "Mine's right here, too. So where do we go?"

"We?" The slim curves of her eyebrows lifted, but she smiled. There was something so utterly natural about his air of hard sureness that she felt almost as though she had always known him.

"Yeah—we. I'll ride along with you, since you're going my way."

"You don't know which way I'm going."

"You're riding for the Two Roses. Your name is Jean Linden; your next birthday will be—"

"That's enough. You know a lot for a stranger," she said. Her eyes were puzzled, cautious, now.

"I was a stranger up until five minutes ago. But as I rode down the road I thought this would seem like home if I could meet the right girl—one with red hair and a turned up nose."

"My hair isn't really red, and when you met me, you only stopped because John Deering was being unpleasant."

"Just who is this Deering?" he asked, his face sober once more.

Jean stepped off the boardwalk and swung into her saddle before she replied.

"The richest man in Wyoming, and owner of the Drovers Bank. I was talking to him about a loan on my ranch. He was my father's closest f r i e n d—I thought."

"He wouldn't be anybody's friend, that hombre."

The man's odd, amber glance touched hers. New warmth blazed into her cheeks and she said hastily: "I've got to get started."

"Sure." He moved back, but when she wheeled her mount, he was also in the saddle and sending his pony forward beside her.

"I knew you were Jean Linden," he continued calmly, "because I asked where I could find the best looking girl in these parts and they told me to head for the Two Roses."

She smiled, but the blaze of color was still in her cheeks and she was still too conscious of him, too disturbed by his nearness.

She led the way down the wagon road and out onto Black Butte trail. Occasionally, she darted a swift glance at the man and once his eyes met hers. And once more she thought of the fierce sweep of wind tearing from the mountains, driving against everything in its path.

Abruptly she flicked the quirt against her pony's shoulders and he stretched out—only to stumble and crash to his knees.

BEFORE she could leave the saddle the man was at her side, lifting her to her feet. Then he turned back to the floundering pony.

"Must have stepped in a hole. Let's hope he's not hurt."

He pulled the animal up slowly and

bent over to rub its trembling legs.

"Pretty badly scraped; we'll have to go slowly," he said at last. "Dumb thing for a range pony to do."

"Jerky's anything but dumb. Accidents can happen."

The man turned and looked down at her and a grin spread over his brown face. "You look about ten, and as if I'd said your dog was a mutt."

He was suddenly too close to her and she was remembering that John Deering had called him a "tough hombre." And now, alone with him on the empty range, she knew what Deering had meant. It was stamped on his brown face, showed in every sweeping line of his body.

"We'd better get started," she said hastily, trying to avoid his eyes.

But still she did not turn away. They stood facing each other in the misty blue of early twilight and it was as if strong hands were forcing them together.

Then she aroused and said violently.

"I'm riding alone!" Her words were thin with sudden, almost fearful anger. "I've had enough of your company, mister."

"Wait, ma'am, I—" He broke off abruptly, whirled from her and his hand dropped toward the gun at his thigh.

A horse was clattering swiftly up the trail and a second later a rider shot into view. As he caught sight of the man and girl on the trail, he pulled up.

"Jean!" he called.

It was Carl Deering, the son of old John Deering, and junior partner in the Drovers Bank.

"Dad told me there'd been some trouble," he said.

"Yes!" Jean began to speak furiously. "The trouble was with him!"

But then her anger lowered, for she had known Carl all her life and he was totally unlike his domineering father. "I was talking to him about a loan and—he got unpleasant. This is—" She paused uncertainly, looking at the other man.

Deering was staring at the stranger with narrowed eyes. "I know who he is. Any reason for you to be mixing in, Farley?" he said to the man.

"Sure." The words were cool and drawled. "But just now it looks like you're the one who's horning in."

"Wait a minute!" Jean stepped between them and faced the stranger. "What's this about? Are you Bill Farley?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Then you—"

When she broke off, he grinned. "Yeah, I've heard some things about myself in the last day or so, too. I'm getting the idea I'm not popular around here."

He looked at Deering, over her head. "Thanks for coming to find out about Miss Linden. We'll be riding now."

But Carl jumped his pony forward as though he would ride down the other man. "I'm taking Jean home."

"Are you?" Farley's tall body was at ease but the girl sensed the tightening of his muscles, realized that in another second his hand might flash down to this gun. She moved swiftly between them again, swung up on her pony. She was still smarting at the rebuke old man Deering had given her. She said:

"Mr. Farley will see that I reach the Two Roses all right, Carl."

"Jean!" Deering's dark surprised eyes stared into hers. "Maybe if you understood you wouldn't pick out such a—a tough hombre to travel with."

"You've said your piece, Deering," the soft-voiced man drawled.

FARLEY stepped into his saddle, turned his mount after the girl's. "*Adios*, brother," he said to Carl Deering.

Jean rode on at a walk without speaking to Farley or looking at him, staring straight ahead and wondering why she had done that to Carl.

Why, too, had she permitted Farley to remain with her after what had happened a few minutes before? She had never seen him until they met before the

bank, and yet he had caught her into his arms, his hand flaming against her shoulders.

Finally, near the flats, where the Black Butte trail forked, she pulled her horse in.

"It's only a mile or two more to the ranch and you ought to turn off here for the Bar Y Bar," she said.

"A mile or two isn't any riding," he began calmly, although there were flecks of light in his eyes. "I reckon I'll—" His words stopped abruptly and he slid from the saddle to the ground. At the same instant a gun cracked—a rifle fired from the brush!

Farley caught her arms and dragged her to the ground as a second bullet snapped past them.

"Get down! Lie flat!" he said, his voice curt, harsh. "Stay there!"

He was gliding away from her, his Colt in his hand. She saw his gun arm sweep up, and the weapon roared against the gloom, again and again. She could no longer see him for he was crouching behind the brush, but the rifle was answering. Then she saw Farley returning, moving with an odd gliding stride.

"I'm going to lead them away." He swung into the saddle and lifted the reins. "Keep out of sight until they've followed me."

"No! I've got a gun, too," she said. "And I don't mind using it on dry-gulchers."

But he was already racing back down the trail. She saw him twist in the saddle and snap lead at the man hidden in the sage. The rifle barked in reply, but Farley's flying pony continued to race wildly toward town. The rifle sounded again—then Jean heard the noise of a second horse. Whoever had been hiding in the brush was following Farley at a gallop.

She got up and ran through the sage, trying to catch a glimpse of the second rider. But she could see nothing except the dim outline of horse and man. Then he was far down trail and the clatter of hoofs were already fading.

JEAN started back to her pony. No use following Farley now, for he would have reached town by this time. Besides, she did not want to meet the man who had been hidden in the brush! She was afraid to be sure about who he was!

In the saddle again, she headed for the Two Roses, telling herself half angrily:

"Carl isn't like that. He wouldn't dry-gulch anyone! He didn't have a rifle with him!"

Then she jerked nervously at the reins once more. A rider was pounding after her, racing up trail as if to overtake her. Her hand dropped to the butt of the Colt at her hip and she turned in the saddle.

It was Carl Deering.

"Jean! What's happened?" He stopped his horse beside her, his face tense, worried. "I started back to town, then decided I'd better follow you to be sure. Where's Farley?"

She stared at him, trying to read the expression of his eyes.

"He rode back," she said. "What did you want to be sure of?"

"That you got home safely, of course," he said.

"Well, someone shot at us, from the brush," she said. "Did you hear the shots?"

"Shot at you?" he said. "At him—you mean!" His eyes suddenly were watchful. "No, I didn't hear the shots."

"Didn't you pass Farley on the trail to town?" she asked.

"No, I didn't see anyone. As long as you're safe, I'm satisfied." Deering paused, his dark eyes seeming to stab through the dusk. "Might be a good thing for this country if whoever fired those shots had gotten Farley."

"Carl," Jean spoke slowly, watching his face. "Why do you feel that way about him? Your father spoke as if he were a criminal, too."

"Maybe he is. He's got a big ranch in Montana and has the toughest outfit of gunmen anybody ever ran into. He's taken over more and more land up there and the rest of the cowmen are so afraid of him that they keep still."

"Why are they afraid?"

Carl laughed, but the sound was short. "Things happened to the men who tried to stop him. Sometimes ranchers were found dead."

"Then why did he want to buy the Bar Y Bar?"

"To make a lot of money, fast. That's why I wanted to talk to you tonight, Jean. I tried to make Dad arrange the loan on the Two Roses, but he won't. So, I've thought of a way for you to get the money. Now, listen!" He leaned forward in the saddle. "And don't get excited. You've heard of the Elkins Sheep Company—wait." He broke off as she stiffened. "It's a rich concern and they need range. They've been trying to get some here for a long time. If you'd sell them just a little of your land, they'd pay anything you asked for it."

Jean sat very straight, looking at him.

"Carl, if you were a cowman and not a banker you couldn't have said that."

"Maybe I'm saying it because I want to help you. I'd hate to see you lose the ranch and besides, by making the right agreement, you may keep this range from being turned into sheep country. The Elkins outfit have already made a deal with Bill Farley; that's why he bought the Bar Y Bar. He's going to help them bring in sheep and force the cattle growers out."

"He's a cattleman," Jean cried. "He wouldn't do that!"

"Wouldn't he? Fred Spear, the manager of the Elkins Company, was in the bank today; he told us that and he ought to know. He's worried because when Farley starts to work it will mean war. Now, if you were to make a deal with the Elkins people to run — say — five thousand sheep, you could specify they weren't to bring any more in to any part of this valley. You'd save your ranch and stop Farley from overrunning this land with sheep."

Jean's slim, denim-clad young boly became more taut and her eyes more level.

"Sheep ruin range for cattle," she said. "I can't do it."

"But this wouldn't be the same as if the whole range were being opened to them; sell just enough land for five thousand sheep."

"No. I'm a cattle grower—and what about my neighbors?"

"All right." He lifted his reins. "It's up to you, but you'll lose the Two Roses and then Farley and his gun-throwers will hand the valley over to the sheepmen anyhow."

Her mount clopped around the last curve in the trail. She could see the lights in the Two Roses ranchhouse. Home. Her parents had come here after their marriage and built a great ranch out of a prairie wilderness. This was her world—the only world she knew—and she could not lose it!

"Carl," she spoke suddenly, "maybe the Elkins people would promise not to buy any additional range here and keep their sheep from flowing over the land."

Deering stopped his pony and turning, caught her hands in his. "I'm glad you're seeing it, Jean. I've been worried about you, but this way you can keep the ranch—and shut out Farley besides."

She slapped the quirt across her mount's shoulders, forgetting his injured leg. She wanted to run from something; from something that was part of herself—from the thought of a tall man with lazy, amber eyes.

CHAPTER II
Death Shot

AT THE ranchhouse the girl led the way inside and in the living room, Carl lighted the oil lamps. Then he paused to look at her.

"There's something pretty domestic about this," he grinned. "Returning home together like this. I've thought about that more than once, Jean."

The screen door snapped open and booted feet hurried into the hall. "Miss Linden—Jean!" a voice called.

It was Len Conway, the foreman, and his middle-aged face looked queerly gray.

"There's trouble outside, ma'am. A tough hombre just brought in one of our boys, wounded. Says our boy tried to kill him and he shot him in self-defense."

Carl Deering whirled and strode past the girl.

"Who is he—who was shot?" he rasped.

"Whitey, and he's in bad shape."

"Then come on," Carl snapped. "Don't stand here."

The foreman turned back to the door and Deering hurried out after him. But less than a second later, Jean also sprang for the door and ran down the steps.

While she was still halfway across the yard she could she the waddies crowding about the open door of the bunkhouse. She quickened her stride, driven by a new fear. The men fell back to let her pass, but on the threshold of the room, she paused.

Bill Farley was inside. He was facing Carl Deering and his hand was poised above the gun against his thigh. As the girl appeared his glance flickered toward her only to return at once to the man.

"What's happened?" Jean demanded. "Conway said one of the boys was shot."

"Yeah." Farley looked at her obliquely. "I followed the hombre who shot at me tonight, circled back and chased him into the hills. I caught up with him—and there he is."

He nodded toward one of the bunks and she whirled. Lying on the bed, unconscious, was one of her own riders!

Automatically she started forward, then halted and turned back to Farley.

"You shot him and then waited to bring him here! You could have gotten help quicker than that!"

"Yeah." He looked down at her. "But I wanted to keep the record straight. One of your boys has started to town for a doctor; he'll probably live anyway."

Jean moved to the bunk and bent over to touch the waddie's cold forehead. Then she straightened and once more looked at Farley.

A tough hombre. Yes, he was that. Cold-blooded, also, to ride back here with a dying man, merely to "keep the record straight."

"No one from this outfit would want to kill you," she said. "Are you sure this is the man who shot at us?"

"Couldn't be mistaken, ma'am."

She hesitated, then turned toward the door as she became aware of the waiting men. They were standing too silently, too quietly!

"Jackling," she called to one of them. "Please stay in here with Whitey until the doctor comes. I want someone to get the sheriff, too, and send him to me when he arrives. I'll be at the house."

She started for the door, but suddenly Carl Deering was blocking her way.

"Not so fast, Jean. If this hombre shot one of your men, he's going to jail, or maybe even get a rope."

"You heard—"

But Deering's voice cut through her words. "The boys are with me, too. We're just keeping Mr. Farley in this bunkhouse until the sheriff comes."

Jean's glance darted to Bill Farley and she knew that in another second his gun would meet the challenge of Deering's. She stepped deliberately in front of Carl so that the muzzle of his Colt almost touched her.

"Put that away," she said, her voice pitched to carry to the men outside. "I'm giving the orders here."

DEERING'S dark eyes seemed to flare. But he nodded and dropped the gun into its holster.

"All right, but you'll wish you'd let us handle him," he growled.

"She's not exactly stopping you," Farley snapped.

Jean faced him swiftly, her red-gold head lifting. "I'll take your gun, too."

He grinned at her. "I need it just now, ma'am. Sorry."

The men around the door were stirring, starting to push into the room.

She swayed closer to Farley and her hand shot out, caught the gun and tore it from his fingers. He turned, his face

suddenly white, his eyes glinting. But he drawled:

"If you want it that badly, why, it's yours, ma'am. I wish you'd keep it."

"Let's cut this out!" Carl growled. "Get busy, boys, and see that he's nice and safe!"

The waddies were suddenly inside the room, moving forward like a queer, threatening wall, their eyes steadily on Farley.

The girl's fingers tightened on the butt of the gun she had just taken from him. Tightened desperately, to stop the trembling of her hand.

"Get out!" She leveled the gun and looked at the Two Roses outfit. "You're still working for me."

They hesitated, and then, sheepishly, turned back to the door, almost bolting through it.

"Now," Jean faced Farley and Carl again. "There's going to be no more gunplay here. One shooting is enough. Carl, I wish you'd stay with the men until the doctor and sheriff come because I'm taking Mr. Farley up to the house. There are some questions I've got to have answered."

As she faced him in the living room, Jean told herself she would not be aware of his likableness; nor realize that his nearness was an excitement—a bewildering excitement.

"First," she said crisply, "you'd better tell me exactly what happened tonight. If Whitey really was trying to kill you, that's one thing. But if he wasn't, I'll have to turn you over to the sheriff."

Something like the shadow of a smile flickered across his face. His glance touched hers and once more she was conscious of sudden warmth in her cheeks.

She turned abruptly away and dropped into a chair.

"Well, ma'am." He sat opposite her, his spurred heels rubbing the carpet. "I've figured a few things out, but they don't hook up. Before I came to this country, I heard a bunch of sheep-men were trying to buy into it. That's one of the reasons I took over the Bar Y Bar. I hate to see good range ruined."

"But what has that to do with someone trying to kill you? Or your shooting Whitey?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe somebody figures I might be kind of troublesome about letting sheep come in."

Jean straightened. What had glinted in his eyes as he spoke? Did he know of her agreement with Carl—or suspect it?

That was impossible. But why was Bill Farley looking at her like that? His eyes were sparks of amber light against the brown of his face.

She stood up in sudden confusion. "You'll have to excuse me for a few minutes. I just remembered I've got to give the cook an order for supplies tonight or we won't have them in time."

"Certainly, ma'am," he murmured getting to his feet.

But the tone of his voice sounded odd—almost mocking. She hurried from the room and went into the kitchen where Ho was muttering aloud as he clattered pans. She began checking the weirdly written list. Her hand clenched on the pencil in sudden terror as a gun roared from the yard outside.

"Missy! Missy!" Ho began.

BUT she was already running past the Chinese, pushing open the swinging door into the dining room, racing for the long hall. Someone was standing just inside the door, as if he had entered only a second before. It was Bill Farley and as he looked at her, his face was unreadable.

"Did you hear that?" she cried. "There's more trouble."

"Stay here and I'll go, ma'am," he said quietly.

But she was already through the door and hurrying down the steps. He caught up with her and then strode ahead toward the bunkshed. She could hear the men shouting, and some of them were running for the corrals.

She reached the oblong of the light from the open door of the bunkshed and then someone barred her way.

"Don't come in here, ma'am."

It was Farley and behind him was Carl Deering. Farley's face was expressionless and there was a gun in his hand although she had taken one from him half an hour before.

"I'm coming in," she told him and brushed past him to stop with a cry of horror tearing itself from her throat. The wounded Whitey was still lying in his bunk, but now he was dead. He had been killed since she left the bunkshed; shot directly between the eyes!

The room suddenly seemed to whirl around Jean and she could see nothing except dizzying streaks of black and white. But words finally broke from her moving lips. "They — somebody killed him while he was unconscious."

"Yes, Jean."

Bill Farley's voice was low. He was beside her and when she continued to stare in horror at the still figure on the bed, he put his arm around her.

"Come away. Conway's gone for the sheriff."

"But how did it happen? Who shot him—why?"

"Jackling said he stayed with him until the other boys drifted out. Then he heard a commotion down near the corrals and stepped outside. Everybody was running for the corrals when they heard a shot. They rushed back and found Whitey dead."

"Why?"

"Probably somebody was afraid he'd talk when he was conscious," Bill Farley said quietly. "I'll take you back to the house, now."

"No." She stood erect and drew away from him, struggling to control her trembling lips. "Did someone ride in and kill him or was it done by one of my outfit?"

Before Farley could speak, Carl Deering broke in. He stepped between the girl and the other man, putting his hand on her arm.

"My guess is that the hombre who shot him is still on this spread, Jean. We were all outside waiting for the doctor when the ponies in the corral started a rumpus. Then this happened."

His hand tightened on her arm and he looked at Bill Farley.

"You brought him back wounded, with a yarn about his trying to kill you—but we never had a chance to hear *his* story."

"Then maybe I did it? I was in the house with Miss Linden, but still I might have been out here, too? Is that what you're hinting, Deering?"

Jean's glance lifted to Farley's. And then she remembered that he had not been with her when the shot was fired. She had heard the gun while she was in the kitchen, and when she reached the front of the house, Farley had been standing in the hall, as if he had just entered.

"You—" she started to speak, stopped and for a second they looked at each other and she was sure that his eyes signaled a warning.

She stepped back, away from him.

"I want both you and Carl to come up to the house with me," she said.

Then she called to the riders waiting outside. "Two of you stand guard in here until the sheriff arrives."

The men moved silently to obey her orders and she left the bunkshed with Carl Deering and Farley behind her. They stepped out of the shaft of light from the door. Then Farley moved away, into the darkness.

A second later hoofs slapped toward the gates.

"Jean!" Carl shouted. "He's leaving! He's afraid to wait for the sheriff!"

His gun flipped up and roared. But the steady, fast pound of hoofs continued.

Farley had gotten away.

CHAPTER III

Sheep Herder's Trap

DEERING dropped his Colt into the holster and started for his pony, calling, "Let's stop him, boys!"

"No!" Jean cried. "That's the sheriff's job!"

But the men were already leading out their ponies, throwing on saddles. When the girl reached the corrals they were into their saddles and pounding for the gates. Carl Deering had given them the word for which they had been waiting. Now they could avenge Whitey's death. And she knew they had already convicted Bill Farley of the killing and were now ready to shoot him on sight.

"Carl acts as if he were running the Two Roses," she told herself furiously. "But I'll show him that he's not!"

She let out her own mount and got into the saddle, settling the gun at her waist. Then her heels raked the pony's flanks.

The thick darkness had fallen and the moon lifted serenely into the sky as she raced down the trail. Suddenly she jerked at the reins and attempted to reach her Colt at the same instant. For a man had ridden out of the brush to block her way.

"I just wanted to talk to you, ma'am," he said.

It was Bill Farley!

She twisted in the saddle to look at him. "You stayed here, near the ranch! Do you know the outfit's looking for you?"

"I expected that, but I wanted to see you. Let's get off this trail before they come and start rope throwing."

Without waiting for her answer, he rode back into the brush, and after a second's hesitation, she followed. Beyond the wall of sage the range dropped away like a vast park and Farley got out of the saddle, turning to help her down to the ground.

"Why did you leave?" she demanded. "That is—if you didn't kill Whitey?"

The moonlight was slanting across his rakishly tilted Stetson, and as he looked at her, he pulled it off. The clean glint of his hair showed and she could see his eyes, now.

"If I'd stayed, there would have been trouble. They might even have held me in jail for a while and I want to find out a few things. It would make a nice cover-up for somebody else if I were arrested."

"Cover-up? You mean somebody killed Whitey just to make it look as if you'd shot him?"

"Not exactly. Whitey was killed because he knew too much and I've got some ideas as to what he knew. If the sheriff wants to see me later, he can—when I get back. But I'm riding south, first, to have a look around. The sheep people down there would do almost anything to get into this country!"

"If you leave tonight, you'll be charged with Whitey's murder."

"I'll have to take care of that later, ma'am. Just now I've got other things to think about. I waited here because I wanted you to know I'd be back. Figured the outfit would light out after me and I might get a chance to talk to you alone."

Jean was silent, watching him. Uneasily silent.

"I—that wasn't the only reason I wanted to see you," he went on, his voice dropping. "What happened on the way out from town wasn't—just what you thought, maybe. I lost my head because I'd found you. That sounds crazy, but Jean—"

His voice dropped even more and then his words halted. The moonlight was spilling across his face and making shadows on his fair hair. Her lifting glance met his and in that second, she knew. This tall, hard man had stepped into her life, had walked straight into her heart! Within these few hours he had made it impossible for her to ever again be free!

"Jean," he murmured again. "I hoped I could make you understand."

Then his hands found her and she was close to him, tight in his arms. There was no need of talk now. His arms were around her, changing the world, bringing it crashing down to a tiny space which held only the two of them.

After a long time she drew away, whispered:

"I've got to go back. But I'll be waiting."

HE KISSED her, swiftly. Then she started for the Two Roses, where the sheriff would want to question her about Whitey's death—and Bill Farley's escape.

Three days later, as Jean left the ranch yard, she avoided the eyes of her men. Since Whitey's death most of the outfit had stayed close to the home ranch, always armed, always tense. The sheriff had investigated the killing and said he was not ready to issue a warrant for Bill Farley. He would wait for further proof.

But the men wouldn't wait, once they found Bill. Jean knew that. And today, he was returning.

She swung her quirt against the pony's shoulders, urging him into a fast canter toward High Range.

And today the sheep were coming in! She had signed an agreement with the Wilkins Company to graze five thousand sheep on the narrow valley range. Carl Deering had handled the whole matter for her. And today the sheep were being driven in. She hadn't expected them so soon.

"As though they knew they'd get the range," she told herself, "and had everything ready."

On High Range she pulled in and turned reluctantly to look down at Narrow Valley below. There was a queer, sick feeling around her heart as she saw clouds of dust lifting into the sunlight, heard the distasteful *baa-baa* of the sheep.

She sat rigid, watching. Carl Deering had said Bill Farley had come to force open the range for the sheep. But it was she who was doing it! She was letting them in!

For an hour she watched. An hour during which her mouth went dry and her throat ached. When Bill returned, what would he say?

With the milling sheep came wagons, men on scrubby horses, men afoot and numerous dogs.

At last Jean sat erect in the saddle and her face became white as she whispered: "Five thousand! There are more than five thousand in already."

She bent forward, lifted the reins and jerked her pony around. They were bringing in several times five thousand sheep! She would have to stop them. Why, this would mean destruction to the whole valley!

At top speed, she rode for the slope, crashing recklessly down to the lower land. The sheep were like white ruin sweeping over the range, and the sight of them made her a little mad. She had to stop them somehow.

Her pony plunged through the milling, blatting animals, scattering them. The sheep dogs rushed at her.

Out of the choking dust a single rider appeared. He shouted and waved his hat, gesturing her away.

"Turn them back!" she called. "Do you hear—they were only to bring in five thousand, there's more than that now!"

The man looked at her stupidly and shook his head.

Desperately, her hand fell to the gun at her waist and she swept it up, her thumb on the hammer.

"Turn them back!"

"Lady!" The slack jaw fell. "I can't, I'm only a herder—only one. There are others behind me. The boss—you see him. I can't stop them."

But Jean was past reasoning. Her gray eyes blazed against the utter whiteness of her face, and she thrust the Colt into the man's side. "Then you're coming with me—and do some talking! Start riding!"

THE man's jaw wobbled helplessly, but he dug his heels into his crubby pony's flanks.

"Up that slope."

He started up and she rode after him, gesturing him across High Range, onto the trail. She could think of nothing now except the horde of sheep pouring into the range. Within a matter of days the cattle would be driven out, every ranch in the district ruined—and she

was responsible.

"Sheepmen!" she said aloud. "I made a bargain with sheepmen."

The herder was pushing his mount toward town and she rode after him with mild, helpless rage possessing her.

"Stop here," she called as they neared the Drovers Bank. "Get down."

Oblivious to the stares of shopping ranch wives and loitering punchers, she thrust the gun into the herder's back and drove him ahead of her to the bank, bursting into Carl Deering's office without knocking.

As she appeared he sprang up from his desk, his glance darting from her to the frightened herder.

"You've got to stop them," she said breathlessly. "I sold grazing land for five thousand sheep. They are bringing in many times that number. This man'll tell you—he knows! He was with them."

The herder cringed toward Deering.

"I don't know anything, mister! We were just sent in here with the sheep. The boss told us if we had any trouble, Bill Farley's men would protect us!"

For a moment Jean could not believe what she had heard. Then a stillness seemed to fall on her. Her wild, driving fury died. Had he really said that? She stared at him and her hand tightened on the gun she held.

"You—" But her voice choked. She lifted the gun again. "What do you mean about Farley's men?"

"It's not my fault, ma'am. I just work for the Elkins Company. I'm telling you all I know. They said if we had any trouble to get word to Bill Farley and his outfit'd protect us."

Her arm dropped and her fingers opened, letting the gun fall. She did not even hear it strike the floor. Carl moved toward her, picked up the weapon and handed it back.

"Sit down, Jean. We'll try to get things straightened out."

She dropped into a chair. It was true, then. Farley was working with the sheep people. He was what they said. Ruthlessly indifferent to anything but his own desires. A tough hombre. Worse. Worse than that, for this meant he had also killed Whitey!

Deering had gone to a small safe and now he was returning with a sheaf of papers, thumbing through them. Then, suddenly, at his desk, he uttered an exclamation like a gasp.

"What is it, Carl?" she asked dully.

"I can't believe it—look at this! And I thought I was smart! That crooked lawyer of theirs—well, they won't get away with it!"

With unsteady hands, he held out a sheet of paper and at once she found the words he indicated. The deed specified grazing for fifty thousand, not five thousand sheep.

"They tricked us, Jean! They put in that extra figure."

She looked up at him. "Yes, they tricked us. But I'm not through yet."

She got up and told the herder: "You're going back to that sheep outfit with me and I'll find out a few things. Come on."

"But, lady!"

"Come on!"

She moved so that the light flashed against her red-gold hair, and beneath it her gray eyes seemed black, her face completely white.

AS THE man started through the door, she followed him, ignoring Carl Deering's quick, pleading words. The herder pushed open the outer door of the bank and then, after a single stride, whirled with a look of terror on his face.

Confronting him was a suddenly collected crowd, ranchers, waddies, ranch wives, the people of the town. A few moments ago the street had been quiet. Now they were here, and at the sight of the herder, an ugly roar broke from them.

"There's one of 'em!" a man yelled. "Get him! Ride him out of town and drive his sheep over him. Let's take him, boys!"

A tall waddie stepped clear of the crowd and he was holding a coiled rope.

"Let me go!" the herder yelled. "I can't help it!"

He turned blindly back to the bank, but the crowd was sweeping around him and Jean, cutting them off from escape or flight.

The girl flipped her gun from its holster, leveled it and fired at the man with the rope. He dropped the rope and clutched frantically at his arm. Blood seeped through his fingers.

There was a moment's lull, then the crowd turned on Jean. A woman screamed:

"Get her, too! That's Jean Linden! She's the one who let 'em come in. Show her—"

"Listen! Jean tried to make herself heard over the noise. "This man is my prisoner. I brought him here and you're not taking him away. He has nothing to say about the sheep — he's just a herder."

"Teach 'em both a lesson!" a woman's voice commanded.

Jean took a step forward. Her hands felt like ice. "Go ahead," she called. "But as long as the bullets in this gun hold out, I'll use them."

Another feminine tone pierced above the uproar. Then, suddenly the crowd was a mob, an uncontrollable mob, rushing at her and the cowering herder, roaring its hate.

Jean jerked at the hammer of the Colt and it roared. A wild shout answered her. Desperately, while the frightened sheepman cowered behind her, the girl fired again and again. The crowd stopped, then rushed once more. A man stumbled and, hurled on by those behind, crashed into Jean, striking her with tremendous force. She fell to her knees and someone twisted the gun from her hands. Then she was being jerked to her feet, and half a dozen crazed men reached for her.

Then a gun roared over the mob.

Instantly, there was startled silence and Jean, writhing in the grip of her captors, saw Bill Farley riding his horse straight into the crowd.

CHAPTER IV
Love Is a Traitor

HIS Colt was leveled again. "Get away from her or I'll blast a few of you!" he yelled.

The crowd stirred, and stumbled back out of his pony's way. Then he was leaning from the saddle lifting Jean up before him.

"Wait," she said. "I brought that man here—the sheepherder. We can't leave him."

Farley hesitated. She saw his jaw-muscles tighten and knew that each lost second was dangerous. In another moment the crowd might arouse to a fresh outburst.

But Farley whirled his pony, circling the herder as if he were cutting out a yearling. "Take one of the horses at the hitch-rack," he snapped.

The terrified man obeyed, scrambling into the nearest saddle. Then Bill Farley whirled his mount again and snapped his quirt.

"Hold on!" a man in the crowd suddenly yelled. "We want that sheepherder."

Farley's heels roweled the flying pony and once more he flicked the quirt against its shoulders. The terror-driven herder was riding madly ahead.

A gun roared, and the bullet tore through the air only inches from their heads. Then they were away now, racing out of town. But as they reached the trail, a growing roar sounded from behind them—the mob was following!

"We'll cut across range," Farley said. "You!" he shouted at the sheepherder. "This way, fast!"

They turned off into the brush, the herder well ahead.

Farley kept his mount at top speed in spite of the double burden, and he did not speak until they were close to the Two Roses ranchhouse. Then he said in flat, harsh tones:

"I'm taking you home. Even now, your men will probably protect you."

She twisted to look at his face, and saw that it was expressionless. But his voice had held the cruel flick of a knife.

He pulled in before the gates where the sheepherder was waiting. Swinging down, he helped the girl from the saddle and told the other man:

"Start riding, brother. I'll fix things about that pony. Just keep on traveling and don't come back."

"All right," the sheepman said breathlessly. "Thanks. You're Farley, aren't you? They told us you'd get us out of trouble."

"That I'd—" He broke off and laughed. But the sound was short and hard. "Get going!" he snarled.

The herder started north once more, but Jean had already forgotten him. She, too, wanted to laugh—wanted to laugh as he had!

She had forgotten what Farley was until the herder's words reminded her. He had come here to take the range for the sheepmen, and that meant there could be only one answer to Whitey's death. Farley had killed him that night after bringing him to the ranch. Whitey must have known too much about his plans!

"Jean," he said softly.

She was looking up into his face, a sharply-drawn face with the flesh taut over strong bones. She was looking into his odd, amber eyes, while all the heady emotion he had aroused became like a knife turned upon herself.

SHE had felt a traitor when she agreed to let a few thousand sheep onto her range, although she had been driven to the agreement to save her ranch. But this man had ruthlessly schemed to ruin the whole country and had killed to protect his plans—and she loved him!"

"Deering told me I might be able to stop you by selling the sheepmen a little land," she said suddenly, unable to remain silent any longer. "But I was too late. Wasn't that the reason you went south—to see about having the sheep brought in? Did they pay you well?"

He straightened and his tall body seemed to become rigid. She could see the blood dropping out of his face, as if a wave of pallor were creeping up his cheeks.

"What does this mean, Jean?"

She lifted her head. His eyes were narrowed.

"Didn't you come here to open the range for the sheep growers? Or maybe you didn't hear that herder say he's been told you would protect him?" There was bitter irony in her voice.

He did not speak, and it seemed that minutes passed while he stared down into her face with his own turning hard. Then he moved back, away from her, jerked off his Stetson and stepped into the saddle.

"Bill!" she cried, unable to stop the word.

But he was gone, his mount headed toward the south.

Jean watched Bill Farley until he disappeared beyond the curve in the trail, then she turned into the ranch yard, only to stop. Half a dozen waddies were riding toward the gates, their ponies bearing saddlebags and blanket rolls.

Instantly, she knew. They were leaving. The outfit had learned about the sheep in Narrow Valley, and they were riding.

She stood aside, watching them pass. Most of them averted their eyes. But the last one, a middle-aged rider, pulled in.

"Sorry to be saying good-by, ma'am."

"I'm sorry, too, Jim." She kept her chin up and made her voice level, although there were tears in her throat. She would not ask them to stay and if they wished to go, would make no effort to stop them.

"Well, ma'am, we don't blame you so much; we know Farley's the one who started this thing and talked you into it. But he won't get away with anything else because we figure on taking care of him and even things up for Whitey."

He rode on and once more, she started

for the house.

"Miss Jean."

It was Conway, the foreman, and as she faced him a nervous laugh burst from her lips. "I thought the whole outfit had gone," she said.

"I'm staying until I know what it's all about," he said, grimly. "The boys tell me you sold the Narrow Valley range to the Elkins people and that there are already enough sheep in there to wreck the country."

"I did sell some range; I had to have money. But they tricked me — they promised that not more than five thousand sheep would be brought into the whole valley. But, they're driving in fifty thousand."

The foreman eyed her bleakly as she rushed on: "I'm going to give back their money. I've still got it. So I'm calling the deal off. They'll have to drive their sheep out again."

"It's too late for that, ma'am. The boys rode in from town a while back and said every outfit's getting ready for war. The cattlemen are meeting this afternoon. First they're going to get Farley, then they'll drive the sheepmen into the next state."

A HEAVY hand seemed to grip her heart at the mention of Farley's name. "Why Farley?" she said, her voice dry, harsh.

"He came in here for the sheep people. Then you—"

"Then I sold out." She drew a breath that quivered against her lips. "I thought I was doing the right thing. Carl Deering said they couldn't bring in any more sheep if I'd deed that range to them."

"Now, I guess it doesn't make any difference."

"Yes, it does. I'm taking the money back. I'll find Spear, the Elkins Company manager. He said he would come in when the sheep were brought here, to supervise the drive. He'll have to take the money."

"But you can't risk your life."

"I'm doing it. Get me a pony."

She hurried into the house, went to the office and opened the small safe. From it she took a sheaf of bills.

Wrapping them in a strip of oilskin, she placed them on the desk while she strapped on a gun. Then, gathering up the money, she went back to the yard.

Conway appeared, leading two saddled ponies. "I'm going with you, ma'am," he said.

"I don't want you, I don't need you."

"Just the same, I'm going."

CHAPTER V
Stampede

THE afternoon was gone now and the hills were magnificent as the sun dropped toward them. But Jean saw nothing except the trail as she pushed her mount for Narrow Valley. When she and Conway rode down the last slope to the edge of the valley, she saw that the massed sheep were like a fantastic ocean —and they were still coming in. At the far end of the valley was a group of tents about which several men moved in sentry fashion.

"Here we go," she told the foreman and raced for the tents. Instantly, pandemonium broke loose. Dogs barked; a gun cracked.

"Stop!" Conway shouted. "You'll be killed!"

But Jean swung her quirt and rode directly to the tents, where she dropped from the saddle. As her feet touched the ground, she was surrounded by men. Then Conway pulled in behind her and one of the men whirled, jabbing a gun into his back.

"Get down and keep still," a voice growled.

Jean's glance swept over the faces around her. "I want to see Mr. Spear!"

"Spear?" A tall, heavy-set man thrust his way through the circle. "Oh, sure, we'll call him." Turning, he bellowed:

"Lady to see you, Mr. Spear."

The sheep company manager appeared from the largest of the tents. He looked at Jean uncertainly, fingering his glasses.

"I'm Jean Linden of the Two Roses ranch. I sold your company grazing rights for five thousand sheep."

Spear fumbled more violently with his glasses. "It was fifty thousand, Miss Linden."

"You're wrong!" But then she stopped, for the heavy-set man had guffawed and the others were snickering.

She looked back at Spear. "We won't talk about that, just now. I've brought the money your company gave me. I want to call the deal off because fifty thousand sheep will ruin this range."

Spear cleared his throat. "You can't do that, miss."

"I'll say she can't," the other man broke in. "Better start for home, lady."

Jean whirled on him. "If I do, you'll be sorry. The cattlemen in this section will drive every one of you out and kill your sheep."

He laughed. "Think so?"

"I know it. Now, please!" She turned to Spear and held out the oilskin containing the money. "This is every cent your company paid me. Take it and leave."

He stared at her, but the other man suddenly reached past him and snatched the oilskin. "Let's look at this—say, that's a lot of money. Thanks."

Jean's glance swept up to him and her young face lighted with new hope."

"Then you'll get the sheep out?"

"We're bringing in more."

"But you have taken back the money."

He laughed and thrust the oilskin sack into his pocket. "You gave it to me. The company still has the deed of sale; you haven't anything to tell where your money is. Now, let me show you something else."

He caught her arm and pulled her roughly toward the side of the tent. "Look down there."

She followed his pointing finger to the sloping end of Narrow Valley. Not less than a hundred men were there, making camp for the night!

"And they're armed, too," he said, gloatingly. "We figured on a little trouble."

"But—" She stared at him and then her hand dropped to the gun at her waist. "You're tricking me again!"

"None of that!" He lunged forward and caught her hand, twisting her wrist cruelly. The gun was wrenched free—and then the man gasped and toppled to the ground.

Conway had broken away from his guards and smashed his fist into the sheepman's jaw.

"You mangy coyotes," he growled. "Anybody else got ideas about abusing the girl? If you have—"

A GUN boomed. Conway staggered, tried to pull himself erect and then fell, face down.

"There's our answer, lady."

The taunting words brought her to life. She could see her gun lying on the ground where it had fallen. Now, she flashed forward and caught it up.

"If that's your answer—then this is mine!"

She leveled the gun and fired point-blank at the man who had killed Conway. He stumbled and sank slowly to his knees.

Then something crashed violently against her. A man had thrown himself headlong against her. She swayed, the world turned into a flashing whirl, and then she fell, unconscious, to the ground.

When Jean opened her eyes, she was looking into darkness. Her head hurt and there was a throbbing ache in her shoulder. Something had happened. Then she remembered! She had come to the sheep camp!

She sat upright, twisting to look around her. She was in a tent—one of the tents of the sheep camp! Hastily, she got to her feet, ignoring the darting pain in her head. Then she paused. Someone was speaking just outside the tent. It

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was Spear.

"If Farley comes, he'll get a surprise," he was saying. "But I don't think he'll come; the other cattlemen will hang him first."

"Maybe, but he's a tough hombre and his outfit's tough, too. Shorty came back from town and said Farley was going to blast us off the range."

"He's the one who'll be blasted!" Spear snapped. "We've got him boxed just where we want him. The ranchers think he's working with us and if we don't get rid of him, they will. Handling the others will be easy."

Jean forgot the pain that was throbbing through her head. She forgot everything except what Spear's words had told her. Farley was not working with the sheepmen! The stories about him had been part of Spear's plan to get rid of him!

She had to get out! If Bill were bringing his outfit to raid the sheepmen, she had to stop him. He didn't know Spear had a hundred gunmen waiting. She remembered, suddenly, the expression in Bill's eyes as he rode away from the gates of the Two Roses.

She went to the back of the tent, lifted it, began to crawl slowly through the opening she had made. Outside, she crept around the side of the tent, grateful for the darkness before moonrise. A few yards away men were loitering about a fire and she could see the ponies tethered a yard or two beyond. Perhaps she could reach them.

Clenching her hands, she dived from the darkness into the glow of the fire, running with all the speed she could summon.

"Hey stop!"

The pony was out, at last. She leaped onto its back. She gained the slope and her mount was struggling through the brush. And then the sound of hoofs rolled from behind her—a single rider was following her.

High Range was just ahead. She raced wildly for the trail wondering if she should take a chance and cut across

range to the Bar Y Bar. Bill couldn't have started yet! He couldn't have!

"Halt!"

In the darkness, the crackling of brush was like gunfire. Hoofs slapped onto the trail ahead of her.

"Start back," the man's voice commanded. "I'll be right behind you."

But Jean did not move. She stared into the gloom with her eyes wide. "Carl!" she almost whispered. "Carl!"

"Hurry!" he snapped.

She listened. Rolling thunder was sounding from ahead—the noise of running hoofs. Either Bill Farley's outfit or the other cattlemen, on their way to the sheep camp!

At that realization, Jean jumped her pony forward, but Carl Deering had already turned back into the brush.

Now the approaching riders were less than two yards away.

"Bill!" the girl called. "Bill!"

The riders slowed and then a single pony moved toward her. It was Farley.

"How did you get here? Start for home—fast."

"Bill," she leaned toward him, in the darkness, her hands half-lifting. "I—was wrong. I mean—"

"Never mind now — just ride away from here," he said gently.

"You've got to turn back. There's a hundred gun-throwers in that camp, waiting."

"Please, Jean." He caught her hands and pressed them. "Don't worry; we'll give them a little surprise. See you later."

He rode on, with the other men behind him.

DESPERATELY, she turned her pony and rode after him. She had to stay near him!

Farley's outfit reached the slope and plunged down it. And then the late moon slid up over the hills. As if that were a signal, two dozen guns roared from the valley below.

Instantly, the Bar Y Bar outfit turned

[*Turn page*]

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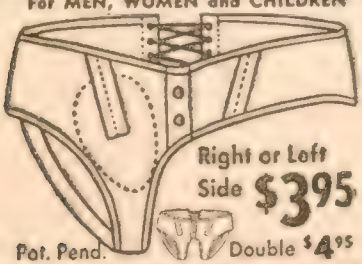

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aside, riding for the edge of the valley. The girl followed, indifferent to everything but the fear that Bill Farley might need her.

The cattlemen were riding into the brush, their guns singing an answer to those roaring from below. Jean also moved behind the cover of the sage. Then terror struck at her. There was a new sound from the west. A queer, earth-shaking sound.

"Stampede!"

Her lips formed the words silently. A stampede, heading directly for the valley!

She saw the first of the cattle rushing forward like a living wave. Plunging, maddened animals were hurtling down the slope. The snapping guns of the sheepmen suddenly went silent, but the waddies above were firing steadily. The stampede was rolling into Narrow Valley without ever nearing the place where Jean crouched behind the Bar Y Bar outfit. Then she understood.

At the edges of the maddened herd, were riders. They were shooting their guns over the heads of the cattle, snapping their quirts, driving them on in their mad flight.

She looked back at Narrow Valley. The sheepmen were running for their horses, some of them even attempting to escape afoot.

A wagon toppled to its side, and became splinters as the stampede swept over it. She heard choked cries, saw a man running desperately, saw him go down beneath the panicky hoofs.

A shuddering sob broke from her lips and she covered her face with her hands. The earth-shaking roar of the stampede continued. The gunshots stopped. Finally the thunder was diminishing, disappearing. She heard the slap of hoofs and lifted her head to stare at the scene of devastation.

The Bar Y Bar men were climbing back into their saddles to ride down the slope. With numb hands, Jean turned her pony and rode into the open, to wait.

Farley's outfit were coming back up

slope. Then she saw Bill, riding beside a man who was tied to his pony.

"Jean! Have you been here all the time? You might have been killed! I told you—"

She met his eyes. "I had to be near you."

He looked down at her for a long second, then his hands found hers. "Do you mean that? Jean, I was afraid for you."

He stopped as the men reached them. The bound figure was Spear, the manager of the Elkins Company.

"We're taking him to jail," Farley told her. "Plenty of reason for that."

"Bill," Jean spoke slowly. "Tonight, Carl Deering was with them."

He looked at her oddly, his mouth thinning. "I know. He's down there," nodding toward the valley. "He didn't get away."

"Oh!" the word was a gasp. "I don't think I can stand any more just now."

"Then I'll take you home," he said softly.

They rode across High Range in silence, but on the lower trail, Bill stopped. They swung out of their saddles—and stood with their horses ground-hitched. Bill moved closer to her. The moonlight was bright now.

"We might as well get it all over at once," he said, gravely. "Deering and his father were working for the Elkins Company. When I moved in here that upset their plans, but then they figured they'd fix things by making people think I was working for the sheep outfit. Even had Spear tell the herders to say I'd protect them."

"But there wasn't any reason for them to kill Whitey."

"Whitey was working for Deering, who had a man or two on every ranch around here in his pay. After he'd followed us from town that day, he went back and told Whitey to get me—sent him after me with a rifle. Then, when I brought Whitey back to your ranch, he

[*Turn page*]

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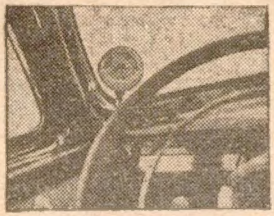

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was afraid he might talk, so he shot him."

Jean once more felt as though her mind and body were becoming numb from horror. Carl, her old friend, had tricked her and then committed a cold-blooded murder!

"I can't hear any more," she said, finally. "Please, Bill!"

"Sorry." He bent over her. "Maybe hearing something else will help you forget. How's this?" He kissed her tenderly. After a while he murmured: "When do you say yes?"

She lifted her lips to his, whispering: "Now."

HEART OF THE RANGE

(Concluded from page 9)

I liked a lot of the shorter stories, too, but I am not going to list them all.—**Jane L. Carter, Washington, D. C.**

That's just the sort of letter we like, Jane. One in which the reader writes and tells us the titles and authors of stories that proved appealing. And we'll tell you a little secret—the authors usually get a kick out of it, too. Here's another swell letter that lists favorite stories:

The stories I liked in GOLDEN WEST ROMANCE are: GIRL OF THE HACIENDA by Nels Leroy Jorgensen, REMORSEFUL SEEKS A WIFE by John E. Painter, BADLAND BAGDAD by Cliff Walters, TEAM WORK by Stephen Payne, CUPID WEARS BOOTS by Richard Brister, THE BROKEN YOKE by Dupree Poe, LOVE EXPLODES AT WRANGLE by Francis H. Ames, NO BRIDE FOR A MOUNTAIN MAN by Hester Holt, THE DEATH COURIER by Gladwell Richardson, CUPID'S BAZAAR AT DEVIL'S CAMP by Thelma Knoles, and ROMANCE RIDES THE RODEO by Foghorn Clancy.—**Bob Clark, Chicago, Ill.**

That's all the letters we'll quote from this time—but there will be others in coming issues, and let's hear from more of our readers! Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, GOLDEN WEST ROMANCES, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody—see you all next issue!

—THE EDITOF

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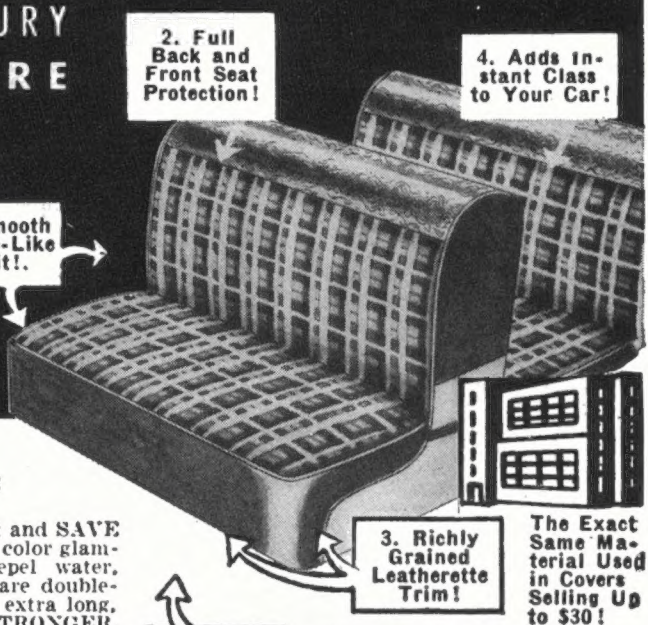
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